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S? HEROES? Sure we dreamed of fame, photo sessions, grateful spacemates lovingly entwined around our Schwarzenegarian quadriceps...but none of us had any intentions of traveling to exotic places, meeting exciting, unusual aliens, or saving Arth from a blob obliteration. In fact, we didn't even know there was a crisis. In school we'd heard about the ban on endurium and the problems Arth was having without fuel. But for all we knew, "shyneum" was a floor wax. And as for getting our hands on the technology to meet the Spemin invasion...well, Spemin ultimatums were appearing so often in the newspapers, we thought they were entertainment columns. An invasion didn't seem likely then or ever.

As it happened, a recruiter — Captain Phloon de Lux — somehow persuaded us to join today's Interstel starfleet. "Be all that you can be!" he liked to say. Our wide eyes (or maybe our acne) must've marked us as "ripe for the picking," because we eagerly swallowed Phloon's promises of wealth, hot starships, and spacemates galore. Call it fate, call it the stupidity of youth — we ended up penniless in a new region of space, far, far from home.

Each of us had an area of expertise, only minus the expertise part. Our two Velox, Ptexok and Rrexolixi — Ptex and Rrex, as Phloon called them — were just cutting their mandibles on basic navigation and engineering. Our science officer, a pasty-white Human in shop glasses named Slim, knew a lot about planets — but whenever he sat down at the ship's complicated sensory equipment he began to fidget nervously with his pocket protector. Cionia, our Elowan medic, confessed that she'd only worked on cadavers and begonias up to this point. She added that she looked forward to working with "our Thrynn brother," meaning me. As for my communications skill, I took one look at the ship-to-ship translation board and knew that the only person I'd be talking to in the near future was myself.

No one was really sure what Phloon did, but he assured us that as captain he was an expert in "fearless leadership" and "getting the big picture." I translated that as "slinging it far and wide." Humans excel at that kind of thing, and this one proved better than most.

STARPORT (35, 73)

The crew waited in Operations as Phloon went off to check on the hot starship he said we'd be flying. Out of boredom, I strolled over to the control panel on the wall where a green button winked at me. Large, indifferent letters indicated its use: STARPORT NOTICES. I gave the button a push. Above me, a huge monitor flickered and came to life.

"Look," I called out to Slim, who lay draped over a bean-bag chair, meditating on a biology crossword puzzle and chewing a wad of gum with audible gusto. "They built Starport in a war zone!"

"I need a nineteen letter word," he said between squishy chomps, "for a small order of Acanthocephala comprising a few parasites of birds that lack a true cephalic extrovert. What did you say about a war zone?"

"We're in one," I answered.

The gum dove to the back of Slim's throat for cover. He swallowed with a loud gulp. "A war zone?" he coughed. "The shooting kind where starships and innocent science officers perish into whiffs of super-heated gas?!"

"I don't know," I said, "All it says is that the Tandelou — the people who live in this star cluster — are locked in some kind of civil war."

The doors whisked open and Phloon entered. "You're not going to believe this," said Phloon, "they gave our hot starship away to someone else. The one we have has...potential. We're going to have to raise our own money to pay for equipment."

He looked nervously to the five crewmembers who were gauging the palpability of his throat. "I didn't know!" he confessed. "They didn't tell me we'd have to pay our own way."

"And when did you start this job?" Ptex wanted to know.

"At least several hours before I recruited you," said Phloon. "Um... look...we can forget equipment for awhile. Our number one priority is to train our navigator to the max."

"Why him as opposed to, say, your communications officer?" I asked.

"If Ptex is lost, we're all lost," said Phloon sagely. "He's got to shoot ships, stun creatures, and spot fluxes — shiploads more than the rest of you do. No offense. Next priority is to give Slim all the science training

his mammalian brain can absorb. The rest of you will get your training as soon as we pull the cash together."

With a ship that wasn't one bolt above sub-standard, a crew that didn't know their aft from a hole in space, and a war raging around us, this was looking like it would be a short trip. I secretly hoped I'd get one night with the Spacemate of the Month before I was turned into space dust. We marched off to the cafeteria in heavy silence. While ordering lunch, some Starport tech-guy asked Phloon what we wanted to name the ship. Phloon got the whole thing wrong: we ended up eating *Excali-burgers* and boarding the *ISS Butterfish*.

MAIDEN VOYAGE

We launched into space and left the Starport system. Phloon called a meeting of the minds. "It's going to take a minimum of 600,000 SP to buff out our ship," he said, "And then we need to pay for training, fuel, jump pods, blasto pods, artifacts, munchies, and videos. Any ideas where the money's going to come from?"

"Recommending planets," said Slim.

Rrex shook his head: "Mining."

"Selling lifeforms," said Cionia.

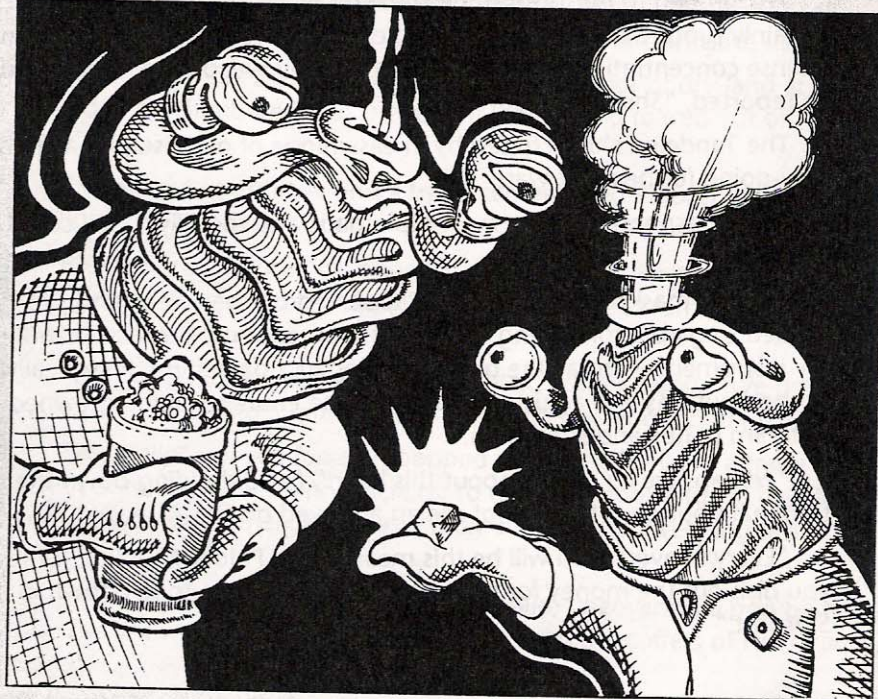
"Bake sales," I suggested. (It wasn't a very good idea, but it was the only one I had.)

"It all comes down to trading," said Phloon, "except for recommending planets, that is. We'll have to try a little of each until we figure out who we can soak...I mean, what the best means of making money are."

Ptex brought out the Humna Humna trademap and pointed out the two systems in the vicinity inhabited by Tandelou. Phloon flipped a shyneum penny — we'd head toward the system outward of Starport.

The encounter alarm sounded almost immediately upon entering hyperspace. Several alien ships, long and intricately geometrical, were hailing us.

"Tandelou," said Cionia.



A young Humna Humna barter with its brood mother for a nutrition shake.

Excuse me and let me apologize for intruding on your cluebook hint handbook like this. In all, the valiant brave crew of the exceptional and otherwise noteworthy ISS Butterfish performed exceptionally and to be sure quite well. It is advisable that you should by all means pay attention to and even possibly listen to their tale story. But let me take it upon myself as ambassadorial ambassador and, as it were, master merchant trader, to provide some helpful tips and various assorted bits of information which may possibly only be provided by a master merchant trader, of which incidentally I happen to be.

In this area region there are approximately, which is to say, precisely five other spacefaring species not including ourselves, in which case, adding ourselves, there would be six if we did include ourselves. For each race species it is important to know the most effective means of establishing a rapport which is likely to result in vast profits and significant information being acquired by both parties, although possibly not by them. In addition it is also important, I might add, to be adept proficient in the many diplomatic protocols in order to avoid the regrettable consequence of ensuing hostilities which can result in the destruction of ones vessel(s) and the occupant(s) therein, which oftentimes, and I daresay usually, leads to a noticeable reduction in profits, not to mention.

We jumped to our posts in preparation of the missiles that would certainly rupture our hull in any moment. Slim worked his control panel, intense concentration throttling his fear. "Their weapons aren't armed," he reported, "Shields are down, too."

The Tandelou ships cruised by in easy range of our lasers — awfully easy-going for being at war.

"Hi," I responded in the most diplomatic and friendly tone I could muster.

A giant, masked plant promptly appeared on the screen and proceeded to garble something. From this moment on, I confess I handled my instruments with all the grace of a dog in a parachute. I frantically pushed buttons and adjusted dials while the entire message drowned in a stream of hiss and shhhhhhh.

"Perhaps we could talk about this later," I said, holding down the terminate button. Phloon shot me an annoyed glance.

"Every conversation will be this meaningful, Phloon," I said, "Unless you dish out the money for my training next time we touch down in Starport."

TANDELOU ESHVEY

W

e dropped into orbit around the lonely water planet in this G-class system. The main computers chattered as a trade buoy, silently circling with us, shot a single beam packed with trade information to the ship's dish antennae. Slim accessed the info. This planet, we read, was the home of the Tandelou Eshvey.

Tandelou Eshvey

29, 74

First Planet

Tech Level: Spacefaring

Population Density: Very dense

Economy: Inflated

Trading Style: Bargain a lot

Sell: System Scanner

Buy: Godmasks *

Holovids

Yellow Huggers

Assorted Eyeball Tasties

Hot Fungus

Pop Berry Plant

Planet Lifeforms: Hive Plant, Hot Fungus, Pop Berry Plants, Purple Screechers, Vacuum Slugs, Wandering Chandeliers

"Inflated economy," said Phloon, "This will be an OK place to sell that paltry supply of Standard Trade Goods that Starport gave us."

With powerful ease, the ship lighted upon a spot of dry land at a low altitude. We clambered into the terrain vehicle and roared out of the hatchway.

"Keep driving until we find a trade center," said Phloon, kicking his feet up onto the dash.

Ptex ignored Phloon, occasionally stopping to collect hot fungus and pop berry plants or zap a yellow hugger — he knew from the trade buoy that the Eshvey bought these lifeforms.

"Don't pick up any other creatures, Ptex," said Phloon. "We don't have room in the hold, and we don't plan on opening a petting zoo."

Eventually, a pink neon sign popped up on the horizon: a trade center. Ptex rolled the terrain vehicle up to the front door and we filed inside. Phloon got a merchant's attention and made a sweeping gesture toward our cargo.

"What would you offer for...*this?!* " he said, uncovering a pop berry plant as if it were a diamond tiara straight from the coffers of Her Grand Lovely.

The creature barely glanced at the bush. "298," it sniffed. A couple of quick calculations told us that was only 73% of its Standard Trade Value of 400 SP. This salad head was trying to rook us.

Phloon winked at me and gestured "600."

"The rule is: double whatever they offer," he whispered to me. The two made a series of offers, Phloon dropping his prices in large increments at first, then subtly narrowing his counter-offers as they approached 400. Phloon held at 433 for a bit, but when the alien refused to pay a penny more, the pop berry plants went for 410 — 102% of the S.T.V. "What the hell," said Phloon, "We got 'em for free anyway."

With Phloon's bartering skill, the other lifeforms went for anywhere between 100-110% of their Standard Trade Value. All 15 cubic meters of Vegetables and Meats, on the other hand, went for a whopping 115% — still only 2588 SP.

"We're not going to make much on these things," said Slim, kicking a rock that squealed and bolted for the safety of some boxes.

Phloon asked the plant: "Are you uninterested in our Standard Trade Goods?"



The Tandelou worship the Most Valuable Thing on the Mystical Peak of Significance on the Isle of Fortuitous Happenstance.

The Tandelou race species is divided into two distinct separate sects of a religious nature, namely the Tandelou Eshvey and the Tandelou Eshvara. In general it is most expeditious to adopt a groveling or, if not that, an obsequious posture, and to feign allegiance to their sect while agreeing enthusiastically with any criticisms they may cast on others. Being hostile with the Tandelou, while certainly enjoyable, is unfortunately not conducive to the acquisition of useful information since they themselves, that is, the Tandelou, will not grovel and beg for mercy, most regrettable.

A final note concerning the Tandelou, which may be of use, though possibly not, is to keep in mind that the Tandelou have a somewhat skewed view of the universe, unlike us Humna Humna who are entirely objective I might add. I might also add that they tend to be annoyingly verbose, so to speak, and rather obtuse, in addition, and boring by virtue of being so talkative, don't you know. The most useful information data which they possess is actually possessed by the Gorzek satellite which, I might also mention, will only speak to or with you if it should happen that the Most Valuable Thing is returned to the Tandelou, which it hasn't been, needless to say, although I just said it.

"We might buy different goods tomorrow," it gestured. "It all depends on supply and demand. Most sorry."

I suggested that we go into space, leave orbit, and wait a day for prices and the demand for goods to change. While this was certainly an option, Phloon said we should just bring the rest of our goods to the other Tandelou and try to sell them there.

As we prepared to leave, the giant plant motioned expectantly toward his own goods. Slim pointed to the System Scanner — not that we could afford one.

The plant shook its foliage. "You must sell us 'Godmasks,' first," the plant indicated. With our limited trade gestures, we couldn't ask him *where* we could find Godmasks.

Phloon briefly examined the rest of their goods and gave him the universal sign for "Forget it" — a low squat with one to two appendages raised toward the items in question. "His prices are not only unattractive, they're downright ugly," Phloon told me. "Never buy Standard Trade Goods in an inflated economy."

TANDELOU ESHVARA

The ice planet slowly turning in the Main View Screen was making the veins bulge on Phloon's forehead. Clean, cool, and oxygenated. Low gravity and plenty of water. But best of all, notably lacking sentient beings that might give a flying fungus if someone paved the place and built shopping malls. A perfect colony world for those brave Arthling frontiersmen and real estate developers. Phloon recorded the coordinates of the system: 34, 71.

"What should we call this place?" Phloon wanted to know. "I think *Phloonville* has a certain air about it..." That air stunk, we all agreed. "How about *De Lux*?" he tried.

It wouldn't appeal to potential colonists. After much discussion, we finally settled on an entirely different name: *Beach Action*.

We continued down to the other Tandelou planet. From what the trade buoy told us, the Tandelou Eshvara didn't appear to be any different from the Tandelou Eshvey. It wasn't clear to any of us what was di-

viding them. Not that any of us really cared why they were getting their leaves in an uproar. Neutrality was more profitable.

Tandelou Eshvara	35, 69	Second Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring	Population Density: Moderate	
Economy: Inflated	Trading Style: Bargain a lot	
Sell: Parasitic Pets Tandelovian Happy Juice	Buy: Godmasks * Electric Balloon Sticky Fruit	
Planet Lifeforms: Black Acid Squirter, Electric Balloons, Expanding Hippo, Single Leaf, Sticky Fruit		

On the planet surface, electric balloons were hovering all over the place. We spent several hours collecting the weird creatures. Their Standard Trade Value was good, and all we had to do was zap and bag them. There were a lot of sticky fruit plants, too — they wouldn't fetch as much, but they came willingly.

Finally, Phloon begged to stop at a trade center. "I've got to use the facilities," he said through his teeth.

"I think I see one over there," said Ptex, swinging the terrain vehicle onto a torturous, unpaved road — insects have the cruelest sense of humor. Phloon stoically endured the bumpy ride by tearing the stuffing out of his chair. The bobbing pink neon sign grew imperceptibly in size as we drew near. Several minutes passed before we stopped at the trade center door.

Inside, intergalactic traders were milling about, tossing strong-smelling fluids down the most unbelievable gullets. Phloon disappeared into a bathroom. Minutes later he returned, absorbed in a copy of the *Trade Barter Journal For Master Merchant Types (Including You, Which Is To Say, Yourself)*.

"What were the urinals like?" I asked.

"Two meters wide with four separate sucking attachments," answered Phloon distractedly. "Look, this Humna Humna trade rag has some really interesting stuff. Take a look at this chart showing the Standard Trade Value ranges for different items. The prices — buying or selling — of Standard Trade Goods, lifeforms, and minerals depend on the

economy of the planet. But the economy doesn't affect the prices of Specialty Trade Goods. As long as you know who your buyer is, Specialty Trade Goods can be sold for more than what you paid for them! Always!"

Standard Trade Goods, Lifeforms, & Minerals	Depressed	Level	Inflated
	50-100 S.T.V.	70-130 S.T.V.	100-150 S.T.V.
Specialty Trade Goods	Buy 50-120 S.T.V.	Sell 120-200 S.T.V.	

"But we don't know where to buy and sell Specialty Trade Goods yet," said Slim.

"That's right," said Phloon. "For the moment, we can only deal in Standard Trade Goods and whatever lifeforms we pick up."

"And minerals?" asked Rex.

"Mineral prices vary from day to day," answered Phloon. "It's not worth our time to mine 100 cubic meters of gold if we can't turn around and sell it today. Right now we need worlds with cheap goods and depressed economies that we can readily exploit." Phloon targeted a world downspin and outward of Starport. "That system looks like it was banished to the boonies millenia ago," he said, "Their economy can't be great. We'll go there next."

DOWNSPIN EXCURSION

W

e returned to Starport to collect the reward for our colony recommendation. Phloon returned from Operations, a giant grin cleaving his unshaven face.

"That baby was worth 45,000 SP!" he cried, "We're definitely professional planet purveyors as well as merchants."
(In Appendix A you'll find a map of all the planets we recommended.)

With the extra cash, Ptex outfitted the ship with class 3 engines — better mileage, he chirped. Phloon, always money conscious, asked him why class 3 and not just class 2. "If you're going to buy engines," Ptex said, "Buy class 3 or 5 — the other classes weren't worth the money."

As long as the pursestrings were open, Rrex, Cionia and I got fully trained in our respective fields. "Hey, Phloon," I said, "why don't you learn, say, some medic skills — we might need it if the good doctor meets an untimely death."

Phloon muttered something about the big picture and not being a "detail man" and wandered off with several spacemate magazines under his arm.

"Apparently, the big picture is hidden somewhere in those center-folds," said Slim.

We took a circuitous route to the system at 1, 24, going out of our way to check star systems for inhabitable planets. After a couple days of vigorous scanning and logging, we arrived at the home world of the Lieu Vadish, a race of arrogant, winged scavengers. They were pretty vain despite their habit of feeding on road kill, but we didn't hold it against them. We bought a variety of Standard Trade Goods at an average Standard Trade Value of 80%.

Lieu Vadish

1, 24

Fifth Planet

Tech Level: Stone Age

Economy: Depressed

Sell: Jeweled Xsiao Xingtay
Delightful Fungus Chews

Planet Lifeforms: Humanoid Hopper, Glowing Spinner, Running Fungus, Sticky Fruit

Population Density: Sparse

Trading Style: Bargain a little

Buy: Green Blob
Sticky Fruit
Running Fungus

We took the goods we bought from the Lieu Vadish and brought them down to the Mbe, a race of bird-like creatures whose artistic endeavors were as hard to grasp as their name was to pronounce.

"110%," said Phloon irritably. "We're barely going to cut it dealing in Standard Trade Goods. And we have to carry such a stinking big variety of things — our cash is always tied up! We need to find buyers for those Specialty items we keep seeing — that'll be our ticket into the big time. Ptex, take us back to Starport."

Mbe	64, 6	Second Planet
Tech Level: Industrial	Population Density: Very Dense	
Economy: Inflated	Trading Style: Bargain a lot	
Sell: Passion Pumps	Buy: Screech Harps* Spinning Crab Yellow Hugger	
Planet Lifeforms: Hive Plant, Peacock Tree, Oily Spore Bush, Purple Screecher, Spinning Crab, Yellow Hugger		

On our way back , we were stopped by the Eshvey. The communications controls came easy to me this time (correspondence school worked), and pretty soon I was chatting amiably with a masked plant about somebody named Thdok-Bryg-Ahhh. I didn't have to be a reptilian Einstein to quickly figure out that Thdok-Bryg-Ahhh was some cosmic force that the Tandelou assumed controlled the universe, right down to which breakfast cereal you chose in the morning. It was also obvious that Thdok-etc.-etc. was the only subject these pious peonies were really interested in, which made talking to them about as pleasant as slowly getting your ear gnawed off. I did my best to keep the conversation on trade. They filled me in on the Godmask story: the Dweenle, just upspin of our present location, sold these fashion disasters.

Making a small bid for their own products, the Tandelou also mentioned that the Teeelveee, a species living in a lone system at the downspin edge of the cloud, were wild about Tandelovian Happy Juice.

UPSPIN-BOUND

The first sentients we ran across were the Tarn, a species that (according to their cultural bio) liked listening to Singing Beetles more than doing something as mundane as photosynthesizing or consuming food. Slim, always the scientist, wondered if the Tarn somehow lived from the beetle's singing.

"Who cares?" said Phloon, whose interest in scientific theory extended about as far as the pinky he was currently extending up his nostril, "I might care if, say, we had a monopoly on the Singing Beetle market. We could gouge the Tarn for every..."

Tarn	54, 104	First Planet
Tech Level: Stone Age		Population Density: Sparse
Economy: Inflated		Trading Style: Bargain a lot
Sell: Screech Harps		Buy: Singing Beetles * Green Blob
Planet Lifeforms: Dark Lightning, Funnel Tree, Green Blob, Hot Fungus, Popberry Plant, Psychic Blaster, Rocket Melons, Scaly Blue Hopper		

Fortunately, Phloon's loud thinking was cut short by the encounter alarm. A Humna Humna merchant fleet was hailing us. I responded in my friendliest tone and asked them how trade was. They were hesitant to divulge trade secrets, but then I didn't really expect them to give important information to every fly-by-night merchant that breezed into the region (and let's face it, Phloon looked pretty sleazy).

"We're not really interested in trade," I said. "In fact, we're interested in items we *shouldn't* trade."

A confused look rippled over the merchant's face. He scratched his blowhole for a moment. I pressed on.

"Could you give us a list of things we wouldn't want to trade?" I asked.

"Well, ahem, yes, a list summary of items you should perhaps not purchase or never even buy..." he replied slowly, still massaging his single nostril, "I suppose that such a list, top secret such as its content may be, not to mention being of a highly confidential nature, would not

be considered a trade secret, even though I just said it was a secret and about concerning trade."

Trader merchants would do well to avoid purchasing buying the following items:

Assorted Eyeball Tasties	Holovids
Breakitdown Enzymes	Jeweled Xsiao Xingtay
Frywell Laser Cookies	Lovely Glortblorps
Gas Slugs	Parasitic Pets
Fly High	Passion Pumps

"Is there any other information you could give us?" I asked.

He warned us not to go into the cloud without equipment like the Spemin's. Apparently a race called the Umanu lived in the nebula, and they made the Spemin look like Mother Theresa. They had a microwave weapon that could cook a crewmember to juicy perfection in a matter of seconds — regardless of what kind of shields you have. We thanked them for the advice and went on our way.

A little way up the road we came across a Humna Humna planet. Phloon wanted to get rid of excess cargo, and I wanted to see how real "ambassadorial ambassadors" lived. We dropped down to the planet and sauntered into one of their huge, extravagant trade centers. A forest of red marble columns supported a canopy of gilded arches, vaults, and domes. Gold-leaf graced every fixed object — gold-leaf chandeliers, gold-leaf banisters, cherubic gold-leaf Humna Humna children peeing golden arches into amber fountains. A full-on extraterrestrial Baroque blow-out. We made ourselves comfortable in a quarter-acre long couch and ordered cocktails.

Tech Level: Spacefaring

Economy: Inflated

Sell: Frywell Laser Cookies
Data Crystals

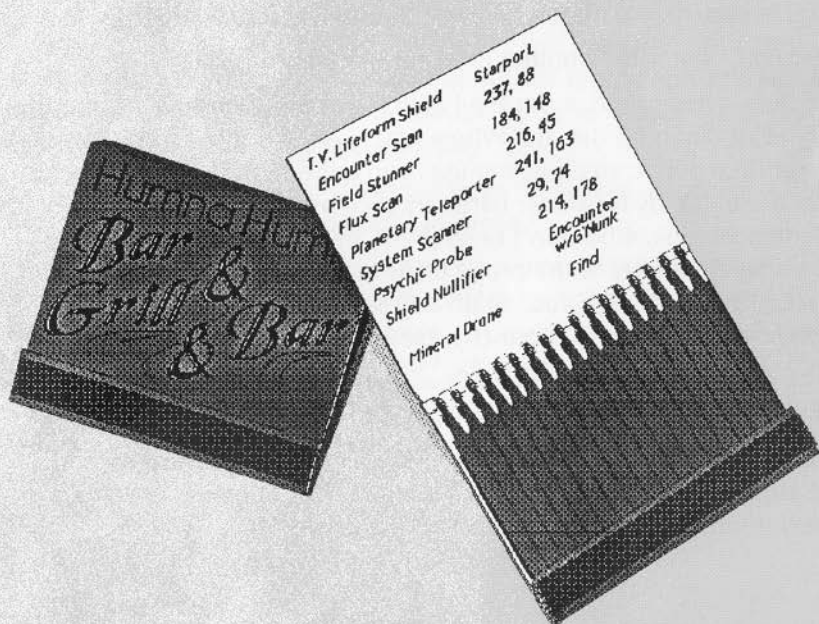
Population Density: Dense

Trading Style: Bargain a lot

Buy: Livelong*
Nutripods
Green Balloon

Planet Lifeforms: Green Balloon, Green Blob, Electric Balloon, Running Fungus

Sitting next to me was a well-to-do Humna Humna trader who'd recently made it big in eyestalk liner. I bought the oversized mollusk an ammonia shake and began to pump him for information. I was hoping to hear the best locations for spacemates — instead, I found where we could get some good artifacts. On a matchbook, I jotted down as many of the names and locations as I could.



The Planetary Teleporter was particularly useful, he told us. It could teleport you and your terrain vehicle back to your ship from any spot on a planet, effectively doubling your terrain vehicle's range and saving you the headache of searching for your ship. The Field Stunner was a good

buy, too — you could stun all the lifeforms in a radius around you with the single press of a button.

I ordered the merchant another ammonia drink. He raised the frothy mug to his mouth and took a long draught.

"If you feature yourselves trader merchants," he continued, "A very useful artifact which could come in handy, I daresay, is the Psychic Probe device which the Kher sell. It function operates by changing hue color depending on the emotional state of those you deal with. Green is a highly desirable color which is preferable and one you want to attain, because it indicates that the person you're dealing trading talking to likes you in effect. Yellow indicates a middle of the road neutrality. Red, usually a quite fine and pretty hue, in this case denotes an angry state condition. If the probe shows bright red, we suggest fleeing as a means of escaping an imminent impending attack."

The ammonia cocktails were beginning to have an effect on my new buddy. His eyestalks were slowly gravitating toward one another — very soon, I feared, they'd hopelessly twist themselves into a knot.

"Waiter," I yelled, "Another drink for my friend."

"Salute, cheers, and down the hatch," he said, cheerfully tossing the silvery elixir down his throat. "Where was I? Ah, yes, the Psychic Probe. As I mentioned indicated just minutes ago quite recently, this artifact is highly useful handy for trader barterers such as yourselves though not for us Humna Humna, who don't need them, needless to say. Watch the probe after each offer. If the probe turns red, the alien being has almost run out of patience with you, so do not continue bartering or you will lose the deal or, to put it succinctly, blow it."

The giant mollusk's head was slowly falling toward the tabletop. I figured we'd gotten enough information from this fellow.

"One more cocktail for my pal!" I yelled to the waiter, wondering what a Humna Humna sees when it's drunk. Pink Spemin? We paid the bill and returned to ship, eager to find the Dweenle.

DWEENLE

T

he search for the Dweenle had us darting from one system to the next, visions of Godmasks and outrageous profits dancing in our heads. We finally encountered a Dweenle ship near the Hook constellation.

Captain Prutzprutzprutz — a short, pale alien with oversized, watery eyes, and a distinctly nasal voice — answered our hail. In my most polite manner, I asked this alien with the Mr. Potatohead physique what information he could tell us.

"We are a very old race," moaned Captain Prutzprutzprutz, setting his enormous head on a spindly arm. "I guess we know a lot about the distant past, but what difference does it make? Sure, I know an enormous amount of useful information, but let's be honest: you don't really care about me. Besides, I'm not feeling very good right now. I've got a splitting headache and I've been a little irregular lately."

Every encounter with this neurotic race went the same way. Each time they hinted that they knew a lot about the region and its past. However, they didn't want to talk about it because *nobody cares, what's the use?* and *we're all going to die anyway*.

"If I had some delicious Nidberries from the Arrow cluster," said one Dweenle captain, "my mood might improve."

"Well, we don't have any Nidberries," muttered Phloon, "But I want info." Phloon spat on his hand, slicked back his hair, put on a sympathetic face the way a spacemate paints on makeup, and started selling. For each of their complaints, Phloon had a response.

"Oh, I know just how you feel...," he said, nodding with such understanding that his head was in danger of tumbling to the floor. "We really like you..."

Blah blah blah.

"We admire your tenacity..."

Blah blah blah.

"We respect our elders..."

Anybody but an idiot or a Dweenle would've been nauseated by the show. The Dweenle captain was just skeptical.

"If you really liked us," he whimpered, "You'd swap crewmembers with us."



The Dweenle become even more suicidally depressed as they listen to a poem by a famous Dweenle orator.

The Dweenle, it so happens, I might point out, do not respond well to either a friendly or obsequious posture, and threatening them in a hostile fashion only results in them becoming more morose and even less cooperative, if you can imagine that, which is hard to imagine. Occasionally, and even now and then, particularly after four or five encounters with a Dweenle vessel ship, they have intimated that if a captain were to swap crewmembers and take a Dweenle on board, they might possibly perhaps be more cooperative. This, most assuredly, has proven to be hogwash, to coin a phrase, if I may, and has only resulted in the acquisition, if I'm not being too harsh, of a whining, complaining, snivelling, wretched little toad. In point of fact, the only way to get anything useful out of this pathetic race of creature beings is to bring them some nidberries, which come, perhaps unsurprisingly, from nidberry bushes.

Phloon leaned back and smiled with satisfaction. "Wrapped around my finger," he chortled. He turned to us: "OK, who's it going to be?" None of us did the dutiful thing and stepped forward, so I volunteered Cionia. Before she could protest, she was transported to the Dweenle ship. In her place stood a pathetic runt of an alien named Prutzoop.

Prutzoop didn't help us get information or even better prices on our Godmasks. In fact, he didn't do anything except whine. We soon realized we'd been had in a big way. I didn't miss my Elowan nemesis much, but she had been quieter than this little turd.

Dweenle	54, 195	First Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring		Population Density: Dense
Economy: Depressed		Trading Style: Bargain a little
Sell: Godmasks		Buy: Amusoballs*
Lovely Glortblorps		Breathing Cactus
Nutripods		Oily Spore Bush
Planet Lifeforms: Breathing Cactus, Dark Lightning, Hill Rat, Oily Spore Bush, Parachute Spider, Red Puff Wart, Yellow Hugger		
Dweenle	12, 205	Third Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring		Population Density: Moderate
Economy: Depressed		Trading Style: Bargain a little
Sell: Lovely Glortblorps		Buy: Amusoballs*
Nutripods		Peacock Tree
		Scaly Blue Hopper
Planet Lifeforms: Humanoid Hopper, Peacock Tree, Scaly Blue Hopper, Rocket Melons, Stinging Cone		
Dweenle	91, 211	Fifth Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring		Population Density: Sparse
Economy: Depressed		Trading Style: Bargain a little
Sell: Lovely Glortblorps		Buy: Amusoballs*
Nutripods		Purple Screecher
		Single Leaf
		Wheel Snake
Planet Lifeforms: Dark Lightning, Glowing Spinner, Pulsating Gummy, Running Fungus, Wheel Snake		

GORZEK

We returned to the Eshvey planet, where we sold our Godmasks for almost double what we paid. (We kept a few on hand, though, in case we ever needed to butter up a Tandelou again.) As long as the Eshvey were in such good spirits, we bought a System Scanner. With the rest of our cash we went to the Eshvara and bought Tandelovian Happy Juice, which we'd sell to the Teeelveee.

We returned to Starport and reported to Operations. The extra cash from our planet recommendations let us upgrade our engines to class 5. Phloon refused to upgrade anything else on the ship.

"No wars to fight yet," he said.

Outside of Starport, the Tandelou told us about "Gorzek-Metal-Father" — some guy or thing circling a gas giant in the system at 28, 79. As long as we were in the neighborhood, we decided to check him/it out.

We found him just as we went into orbit around the planet. He was clearly some kind of super-intelligent machine, but what he was doing there was anybody's guess. He told us right out that we wouldn't get anything out of him until the "Most Valuable Thing" was returned to the Tandelou, which would end their civil war. Well, ending their civil war wasn't the most pressing problem — the Tandelou ruffled their leaves alot but we never saw them squirting defoliant at each other or anything. Still, we wanted to hear what Gorzek had to say.

COREWARD

The trip to the Teeelveee planet was a long haul. There were plenty of star systems to explore for colony worlds, but that was a job for Slim and Ptex's slide-rule personalities. With nothing better to do, I used my time constructively by looking for better ways to annoy Prutzoop. That wasn't easy since, as a general rule, Dweenle get more depressed than annoyed. But after many attempts — Ex-Lax in his dilwater tea, stuff like that — I found that the best way to disturb a Dweenle was simply to be too cheerful. If you

could hum a few bars of *Whistle While You Work*, you were sure to set his teeth on edge.

I was saved from my own idle imagination when a Humna Humna convoy hailed us outside of the Topaz Cluster, just downspin and outward of the Teeelveee planet. Their commander, a distinguished-looking alien with slimy, mottled green skin, greeted us with all the appropriate formalities.

I asked him to tell me everything he knew about the history of the region. Here's the condensed version: Around 800 years ago, two spacefaring species, the Lowar and the Umanu, came to this region and inhabited the nebula. The indigenous sentients — the Dweenle, Humna Humna, etc. — didn't mind the newcomers too much. What anyone did in the privacy of their own nebula was their own business. At this time, the Lowar discovered the shyneum planet in the cloud, the source of cheap, abundant, non-endurium-like fuel. Everyone lived in peace for several centuries, trade was hunky dory, and life was sweet for all concerned.

The happily-ever-after part of the story ended about 400 years ago when the Umanu suddenly started testing some new weapons on the Lowar. The Lowar correctly perceived this as unfriendly and began a frantic search for technology to defend themselves with. They studied the records of the Leghk, an ancient, highly advanced culture that used to inhabit the region. The center for their study of the Leghk was on a planet they called Elthesh.

Leghk ruins, the commander said, were to be found all over the region: on the sixth planet of 105, 75; the inner planet of 60, 156; and on the ice planet of 207, 37.

THE TEEELVEEE



he Teeelveee system was perilously close to the Umanu-infested nebula, but we skirted the cloud without a hitch. We found the planet and descended to the surface. Over the plains of the Teeelveee planet drifted Dark Lightning, a ravenous lifeform capable of devouring a whole crew without so much as smacking its lips. The Humna Humna had told us to avoid the Dark Lightning, and we didn't see any great need to find out if they were liars.

Tech Level: Stone Age

Population Density: Very Dense

Economy: Level

Trading Style: No Bargaining

Sell: Livelong
Singing BeetlesBuy: Tandelovian Happy Juice*
Shimmer Cloth
Eight-Legged RhinoPlanet Lifeforms: Dark Lightning, Electric Balloon, Eight-Legged Rhino,
Peacock Tree, Red Puff-Wart, Vacuum Slug

The Teelveeee were a race of small multi-legged creatures “interested only in jokes and games.” They didn’t seem to think bartering was much of a game, though. We had a choice of agreeing to their price — or agreeing to their price. Fortunately, the Teelveeee made pretty good offers from the start. They certainly bought up the Happy Juice as if it were the Elixir of Life, paying a premium price of 148% of its S.T.V.

We immediately invested the money from the sale into Livelong, which we knew the Humna Humna would buy. But right in the middle of trading some Eight-Legged Rhinos, Phloon’s eyes bulged.

“11,000?” Phloon started. “Why stop there. 8,000! Make that 4,000! Aaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Give them away! Away!” He fell to the floor, his body contorted, his mouth foaming. “Wayyyyyyyyyyyy down in-siiiiiyide. HAHAAHA! Blurblblblb...”

Phloon was acting weirder than normal, to say the least. Hallucinations, violent outbursts, paranoia — the works as far as whackiness goes.

“I’m glad I’m not paying for this,” commented Slim, drily.

“Me too,” I said, “I guess the pressure of commanding a starship got to him, eh, Slim?” I said. “Slim? Slim?”

I looked over — Slim was lying on the floor in the fetal position, eyes glazed and thumb in mouth.

“We’re not staying for our usual sightseeing,” I told the others who, I might mention, were not currently fighting imaginary demons. “Let’s get out of here.”

Ptex got us back to the ship and launched us into space. Once we left the vicinity of the cloud, both Phloon and Slim made miraculous recoveries.

"Where are we?" asked Slim.

"Why is there peanut butter smeared in my hair?" asked Phloon.

I concluded that something in the nebula made our hairless apes go mad.

HOOPLAH (101, 85)

A

s we headed downspin from the Teeelveee, we met a variety of Humna Humna trade transports. With my communications skills and generally agreeable manner, we soon got a reputation for being a likeable collection of aliens. In true Humna Humna fashion, they wanted to show us their affection by selling us things — in this case the trademaps I've included in Appendix B.

One merchant told us a little story of how the Spemin had invaded and taken over one of their planets. The Humna Humna had evacuated the place and left behind some valuable equipment. We could find it, he told us, in some ruins midway up the steepest face of the great cliffs of Pshhhpshhhpshhh. For some reason, they thought we might like to go get it for them.

"Sure, we'll do anything for friends," said Phloon, adding under his breath: "Just not the poor ones."

The Humna Humna-cum-Spemin planet was in the system at 101, 85. Ptex pulled us into orbit. Phloon did his best to set the ship down midway along the cliff face. The terrain vehicle wheezed over the rocks until we found some ruins at 49S, 22E. Among the ruins was a huge device that looked something like a floating cargo bin. Ptex read the owner's manual and figured out that this was a mineral drone: A self-propelled artifact that went out and did the dirty work for you. Rex was pleased — he could put any repair mineral worries safely to rest. Phloon was even more excited. "This thing can suck up yards of platinum!" he cried, "Certainly we should test it before we give it back to the Humna Humna. Didn't one of their merchants say there were excellent mining planets in their home system at 216, 45?" I duly made a note to check it out when we got there.

A HASTY RETREAT

D

ownspin of the Teeelveee we discovered another Humna Humna planet — a fortunate coincidence since our hold was bursting with Livelong. The transaction resulted in more insane profits.

Humna Humna

93, 37

Fifth Planet

Tech Level: Spacefaring

Population Density: Dense

Economy: Level

Trading Style: Bargain a lot

Sell: Data Crystals

Buy: Livelong*

Delightful Fungus Chews

Stinging Cone

Vacuum Slug

Planet Lifeforms: Expanding Hippo, Glowing Spinner, Sticky Fruit, Vacuum Slug, Wandering Chandelier

Feeling like the universe was our giant oyster, we proceeded coreward to conquer the rest of the galaxy. Our first dose of humility came when we ran up against a G'Nunk warfleet. The G'Nunk shoot first, and don't even bother to ask questions. To add to our troubles, they had a device that made our shields inoperative. Phloon rightly figured that our class 1 lasers probably couldn't heat a frozen dinner, much less destroy an alien fleet. We stuck our tails firmly between our legs and ran.

Phloon wanted to know more about who these G'Nunk guys were. Prutzoop had squeezed under his bunk and wouldn't come out, so he was no help. For all his suicidal whimpering, his sense of self-preservation was as robust as anybody's.

We had to talk to more Humna Humna to get the whole G'Nunk story. The G'Nunk, they told us, were a collection of species from the fierce planet of G'Aeresch. The G'Nunk believed in natural selection with something of a vengeance. As they saw it, if you didn't fully appreciate the universal truth of survival of the fittest, the best way to teach it to you was to try to kill you. This was G'Nunk compassion at its tear-jerking highest.

The convoy captain added that it was possible to talk and trade with the G'Nunk, if we wanted. All we had to do was prove we're G'Nasch, which is G'Nunk for *bad dude with a hot smoking laser*. It was finally time for a better ship.

THE G'NUNK

T

he ship got a good upgrading back in Starport — our planet recommendations paid for armor, missile launchers, and better lasers. Rex was so impressed with our new hardware, he re-named the ship the *ISS Buttershark*.

We returned to G'Nunk territory with our shields up and weapons armed. It didn't take long to encounter G'Nunk warships, and they didn't wait for an invitation to start shooting. We immediately went into combat and returned fire. Fortunately for us, the few missiles they launched were easy to dodge, so we never had to quit combat and maneuver away. At one point — after we'd blasted all but two ships — we tried to open communications. They must've thought taking prisoners was un-G'Nasch, because they kept firing. I concluded they were a profoundly proud, but stupid, species.

After destroying a couple more fleets, the G'Nunk stopped coming into encounters with guns blazing — our bristling studliness was beginning to make an impression on them, I figured. When they finally hailed us, it was as G'Nasch. I didn't want to let them off the hook that easy: in my most hostile voice, I demanded their complete and immediate surrender. They appreciated the gesture and said I should always talk to them like that. Being friendly was a sign of weakness; being obsequious was a death warrant. Hostile was the only posture for survivors.

We met the G'Nunk often after that, but always with weapons armed and shields raised. They began to like us so much, they offered to exchange crewmembers; if we accepted, they'd even throw in one of their classy shield nullifiers. The artifact sounded great, but after taking on a Dweenle, I didn't know if I wanted any more extra-Arth species on the bridge.

I glanced over to Phloon to see what he thought — an evil smile was spreading across his face.

"I can't force a crewmember to volunteer for service in an alien fleet," Phloon said to the G'Nunk captain, "But our doctor here has expressed quite an interest in your culture."

The Dweenle opened his mouth wide, but only a small squeak managed to escape before he was transported to the G'Nunk ship. In his place stood our new doctor, a slobbering G'Nunk named Grrg'Ah.

In her left hand, she carried an old fashioned doctor's bag (oh yeah, Grrg'Ah was a lady). In her right hand was a long cylindrical device with several chain-driven blades of varying shapes and sizes protruding at different angles. Judging from the variety of razor-sharp appendages on the instrument, you could cut anything from toenails to fusion pipes. This, she boasted, was the G'Nunk doctor's best friend — a Dyna-Shred Field Surgeon's Slice-O-Matic, especially suited for emergency amputations above the knees but good for almost any surgical task.

Across her chest was a belt full of bullets. "G'Nunk anesthetic," she told me. "Bite one and try not to pass out." She took a small booklet from her bag and handed it to Phloon. "A small welcoming gift from me to our fearless commander," she said. Phloon beamed with pride. I translated the title for the rest of the crew: *G'Nunk Warship Manual*. We found it pretty useful, so I included it here as Appendix B.

Prutzoop was gone for good, much to everyone's relief. For many years I wondered how many minutes he'd lasted on that G'Nunk warship. I smiled as I imagined Prutzoop in a G'Nunk survival contest — kind of like Mr. Rogers in Wrestlemania.



Two G'Nunks confirm friendship by fighting to the death.

If continued survival is a significant priority, we would suggest not approaching the G'Nunk in a friendly or obsequious fashion. Furthermore, and additionally to boot, keep your shields raised and weapons armed at all times during encounters with the G'Nunk, and for this reason avoid G'Nunk encounters in the nebulas where it is difficult, and in most respects, impossible, to raise shields.

A species needs, necessarily, to first prove itself by destroying, in a highly destructive fashion, 20 G'Nunk warships prior to and before the G'Nunk will even speak communicate with them. Once they have accomplished this, if they are hostile and aggressive enough, the G'Nunk will offer to make the new species G'Nunk as well. They may even offer the new species a G'Nunk crewmember. If you accept, you should not be obsequious to anyone or the G'Nunk crewmember will kill itself out of shame. If you're friendly too many times, perhaps this number is approximately 5, the G'Nunk crewmember will jump ship.

G'Nunk crewmembers bring a shield nullifying device with them that nullify shield effects quite nicely using cobalt substance element. However, some excellent advice which would be good to take because of its excellence, would be most definitely not to use the device without a G'Nunk on board, otherwise it can be quite dangerous or somewhat deadly, depending on how you look at it. Also, use the device in G'Nunk fashion: after firing missiles but just before they hit their targets. Finally, in order to get cobalt to use the device, one might keep in mind that G'Nunk ships carry cobalt, not that I'm suggesting anything by this, perish the thought.

G'AERESCH

W

e must be hostile at all times," Grrg'Ah told us. (She was kind of cute when she was so serious.) "Also, we must supply our G'Nunk brothers with endurium to power their ships."

We'd collected quite a bit of endurium from the G'Nunk ships we'd blasted. While none of us were real thrilled about dealing endurium on a permanent basis (the fine for being caught with the stuff was pretty hefty), Phloon decided we could at least sell what we had on us — and turn a profit.

The home planet G'Aeresch turned out to be very hospitable... provided you like jungles infested by voracious, armor-plated, poison-spitting creatures. We found a trade center and brought out our endurium. The merchant didn't seem to care where or how we got the stuff; he would pay us good money for endurium even if we told him we stole it from his grandmother.

G'Nunk	159, 30	Second Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring		Population Density: Moderate
Economy: Level		Trading Style: No Bargaining
Sell: Phase Inductors		Buy: Data Crystals Brass Harpooner
Planet Lifeforms: Brass Harpooner, Dark Lightning, Eight-Legged Rhino, Grey Anemone, Sandpit Stalk , Spinning Crab, Yellow Hugger		

THE ARROW CLUSTER

W

ith the G'Nunk as our blood brothers, we were free to explore the systems in the area. In a downspin cluster shaped roughly like an arrow, we encountered the Nelsons, some down home folks who were the sole producers of Charm Babies. The Nelson's were a pretty boring lot. The men wore dull, sleeveless sweaters and talked about hayseed. The women attended women's socials and knitted. Occasionally both halves came together to square dance or flip cow patties. (But one of the kids sure could sing.)

"Whatdya think of purchasin' one of these here Gas Slugs?" a Nelson asked Rex.

"Hey, Phloon," whispered the engineer, "This guy wants to sell me a Gas Slug. It'd make a nice pet on the bridge, don't you think?"

Phloon shook his head. "I heard that Gas Slugs emit something that gives your crew a buzz and a half. The longer one of these worms is on the ship, the less motivated the entire crew will be to do anything. If he asks again, just say 'No'."

Nelsons	131, 7	Fourth Planet
Tech Level: Stone Age		Population Density: Moderate
Economy: Depressed		Trading Style: Bargain a little
Sell: Charm Babies Gas Slug		Buy: Poison Glider
Planet Lifeforms: Green Balloons, Poison Glider		

As the starship blasted away from the Nelson's planet, Phloon lept to his feet.

"The Dweenle said we could find Nidberries in the Arrow cluster!" he said.

"Who cares?" we all wanted to know.

"We could probably get more info out of them if we had Nidberries," said Phloon. "We'd better get some as long as we're here."

Finding the planet was easy enough. Using the System Scanner, we quickly checked each system in the cluster for a planet with a positive bio-density. The scrawny little plants were on the fifth planet in the star system at 132, 6.

From the Arrow Cluster we headed upspin. In a small nebula we found the Djaboon, a race of six-legged, armored behemoths with a fetish for Charm Babies. What a six-legged, armored behemoth did with a Charm Baby was a matter of conjecture.

"Maybe they hang them from their rear view mirrors," said Phloon. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Djaboon	161, 53	First Planet
Tech Level: Stone Age		Population Density: Sparse
Economy: Level		Trading Style: No Bargaining
Sell: Amusoballs Fire Gems		Buy: Charm Babies* Hot Fungus
Planet Lifeforms: Hot Fungus		

HUMNA HUMNA TERRITORY

P

assing through G'Nunk territory, we proceeded to the coreward side of the region. The Humna Humna inhabited three planets in the area — their home planet was one of them — so it was no surprise that their ships were all over the place.

One Humna Humna commander told us that the Spemin's new toys resembled the technology of an ancient race called the Leghk. The Spemin, they added, worshipped at an ancient Leghk temple on a planet called Bemfblunk in the system at 158, 183.

"Do you think Bemfblunk is the source of the Spemin technology?" I asked.

"I hope so," snorted Phloon, "If we can't match their firepower soon, we won't have a Leghk to stand on." It took all of us to restrain Grrg'Ah from giving him a pedicure up to the waist with her Slice-O-Matic.

We needed extra cash for fuel, so we picked up Firegems from the Djaboon and Data Crystals from the G'Nunk and ran them to the Humna Humna.

"As long as we're in the area," said Ptex, "let's pick up that Encounter Scan. It would help me avoid the Spemin around Bemfblunk." Phloon didn't want to give up the money, but Ptex finally convinced him that we needed it.

"We can pay now, or we can pay when the Spemin demand half of our fuel," said Ptex.

When Phloon wasn't looking, Ptex took the liberty of buying a Flux Scan, too. (Phloon asked later where the hell we got such a cool device. "We found it" was Ptex's reply. A pretty lame excuse, but one bug can lie better than ten politicians.)

The Flux Scan was too irresistible for Ptex and Rrex to just leave in the box. They played with the thing all the way to the end of our mission. In Appendix C is a map of the useful flux nodes we found.

Humna Humna	216, 45	Third Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring	Population Density: Very Dense	
Economy: Depressed	Trading Style: Bargain a lot	
Sell: Flux Scan Vaccinall	Buy: Livelong* Phase Inductors Poison Glider Running Fungus	
Planet Lifeforms: Crystal Sponge Plant, Poison Glider		

Humna Humna	237, 41	Second Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring	Population Density: Sparse	
Economy: Level	Trading Style: Bargain a lot	
Sell: Vacinall Amusoballs	Buy: Livelong* Phase Inductors Green Blob Hill Rat Rocket Melons	
Planet Lifeforms: Rocket Melons, Hill Rat, Spinning Crab, Wheel Snake		

Tech Level: Spacefaring**Population Density:** Very Dense**Economy:** Inflated**Trading Style:** Bargain a lot**Sell:** Encounter Scan**Buy:** Livelong*

Firegems

Parachute Spider

Red Puff-Wart

Planet Lifeforms: Funnel Tree, Grey Anemone, Hot Fungus, Parachute Spider, Poison Glider, Popberry Plant, Red Puff-Wart

BEMFBLUNK (158, 183)

T

he Humna Humna told us that the temple was near the center of the large equatorial island. After some searching and several attacks from the Spemin, we discovered the ruins at 31S, 39W.

The temple was dark except for the glow of a small, antiquated television monitor that sat atop a rickety wooden table in the center of the hall. The quivering form of a large blob filled the screen. I strapped on my field translating device — the blob was repeating a pre-recorded message to all the slimy subjects who came to worship at this Leghk temple.

"We, the High Blob Council," the Spemin stated, "have determined that the Most Valuable Thing is actually just a worthless piece of shiny green glass. In our typically clever fashion we have sold it to the foolish G'Nunk."

"These blobs have more brains than I gave them credit for," said Phloon. "Well, as long as we're here, we might as well fill a few cargo pods with some of those Eight-Legged Rhinos that are wandering about. Next time we stop at the Teeelveee, we'll cash in."

THE NG-KHER-ARLA

W

ith enough Eight-Legged Rhinos to open a meat-packing plant, we left Bemfblunk and the Spemin.

"Where do we go now?" asked Ptex, "To the Teeelveee?"

"The Ng-Kher-Arla are just a hop away from Bemfblunk," said Phloon. "Let's go talk to them first."

We met some Humna Humna along the way who gave us the background on these guys. The Ng-Kher-Arla, they told us, were a peculiar species that metamorphoses every month into three sexes — first the Ng, then the Kher, and finally the Arla. If we wanted one of their Psychic Probe devices, we'd have to visit them in their Kher phase. But if we wanted information, we should talk to them when they're the calm, rational Arla.

They were just starting Kher phase right now. "It seems to be the right time of the month for buying Psychic Probes," observed Phloon, "so we'll go do some trading now. When the 21st rolls around, we'll go talk to the Arla."

Ng-Kher-Arla

214, 178

Fourth Planet

Tech Level: Spacefaring

Population Density: Dense

Economy: Depends

Trading Style: Depends

Sell: Psychic Probe
Dreamgrids

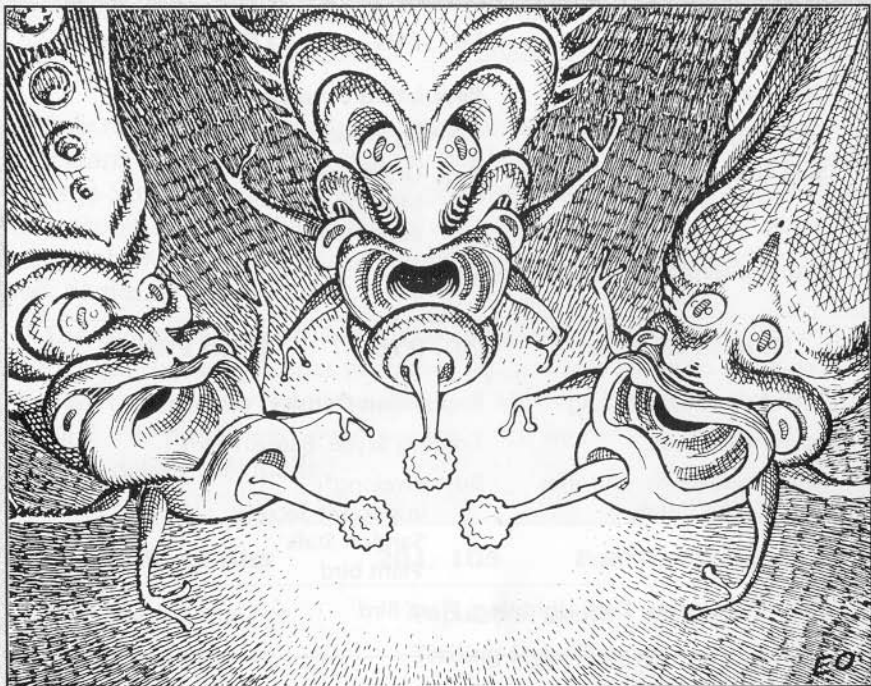
Buy: Data Crystals
Fur Tree
Plant Bird

Planet Lifeforms: Funnel Tree, Fur Tree, Green Balloon, Green Blob, Hive Plant, Plant Bird, Rocket Melons

Tech Level: Metal Age**Population Density:** Moderate**Economy:** Level**Trading Style:** Bargain a little**Sell:** Field Stunner
Mip Fur**Buy:** Dreamgrids*
Data Crystals
Grey Anemone
Glowing Spinner
Black Acid Squirter**Planet Lifeforms:** Black Acid Squirter, Dark Lightning, Expanding Hippo,
Plant Bird

We did our buying with the Kher and waited a couple of days to call on the Arla. When the 21st came, we found some of their bizarre ships and opened communications with them. What they told us about the past was interesting. The Arla, it seems, had been close friends of the Lowar. For many moon phases, the Lowar came to the Arla to study ancient Leghk technology with them. The Lowar had known the location of the shyneum planet, but they never told the Arla where it was. Shortly before their destruction, however, the Lowar mentioned that a strange glowing object came into orbit around the shyneum planet, and with it numerous Umanu ships.

The Lowar conducted their research on their home planet and on a planet "in an A-class system inside the cloud, not far from the Hook." Their research center was on "the highest point of the largest island." One Lowar ship had come close to retrieving some important Leghk technology, but it got so wrecked that it never made it home. It drifted for over 400 years before the Spemin found it orbiting the lone planet in the system at 198, 154.



Reproductive ceremony of the Ng-Kher-Arla on "Sssss," the one day of the year when they metamorphose into all three forms.

The Ng, the Kher, and the Arla, for their parts, are actually three forms phases of the same creature being. These creatures undergo an incredibly extraordinary metamorphosis change three times a month or every ten days. This, it should be pointed out and, I might add, noted here, is the result of a dramatic and otherwise quite extraordinary unique three phase wobble in the orbital path of the planet, brought upon and in fact caused by the gravitational force exerted by six large moons upon their planet sphere. For the first ten days they are the aggressive Ng, becoming you might guess afterward the otherworldly Kher, who believe hold that all, that is, everything, is mere illusionary illusion. Not to point out the obvious, or even belabor the point, it should be apparent that following the Kher is the Arla phase, the most pleasant phase in which to talk speak with them, to be sure. Interestingly enough, if one is a student of this species, in which case one might find this of particular interest, but perhaps maybe not if one is interested in something altogether different, in which case one would ask oneself, "Why am I reading this?," there is one day out of the year, called "sssss" by name, on which they metamorphose into all three forms phases types to exchange genetic material in a highly reproductive fashion, quite.

Nathracch	181,197	Third Planet
Tech Level: Metal Age Economy: Level Sell: Important Secrets Planet Lifeforms: Brass Harpooner	Population Density: Sparse Trading Style: No Bargaining Buy: Dreamgrids Mip Fur Brass Harpooner	
Humna Humna	239, 216	Third Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring Economy: Level Sell: Breakitdown Enzymes Data Crystals Planet Lifeforms: Dark Lightning, Plant Bird	Population Density: Moderate Trading Style: Bargain a lot Buy: Livelong* Important Secrets Sandpit Stalk Plant bird	

DERELICT SHIP (198, 154)

We decided to visit the derelict Lowarian ship immediately. The *Elthar-Esh*, gloomily drifting for 400 years, was still transmitting a message to anyone who cared to hear it. The captain of the ghost ship reported that they'd passed through the singularity and returned, solved the riddle of the Halls of Memory, and fought a lot of bad guys — only to run out of fuel a short distance from home. Aside from posing some interesting existential questions about evil gods toying with mere mortals, the captain didn't say anything we hadn't heard elsewhere.

Slim and I were rummaging through the hold when he suddenly gave out a yell.

"Look what I found," said Slim, holding up a book with a strangely amorphous shape to it. I read a few pages and realized this was a Spemin autobiography. Some blob must've left it behind while sacking the *Elthar-Esh*. The book kept me good company during the many long transits across the region that were to follow — it put to rest any fears

that I had of the Spemin successfully doing anything, much less taking over the universe. See for yourself — I included an excerpt from the book in Appendix D.

Rrex reported that we were running on empty, so we consulted our trademaps to see where we could turn a fast buck. Close proximity made the Nga-Seng route perfect for our purposes. The Nga-Seng are a race of microscopic sentients that inhabit the bodies of non-sentient creatures such as the Kler and the Diul — hence, the hyphen overpopulation in their names.

The economies of both Nga-Seng cultures are closely interwoven — we bought Harmony Stones from the Diul and sold them to the Kler; then we turned around and bought Blue Ale from the Kler and sold it to the Diul. The profits were even sweeter since we hardly used any shyneum to deliver the goods.

Nga-Seng-Kler	201, 105	Fourth Planet
Tech Level: Metal Age	Population Density: Moderate	
Economy: Depressed	Trading Style: Bargain a lot	
Sell: Blue Ale	Buy: Harmony Stones*	
	Mip Fur	
	Oily Spore Bush	
	Stinging Cone	
Planet Lifeforms: Oily Spore Bush, Sand Pit Stalk, Parachute Spider		
Nga-Seng-Diul	203, 106	Third Planet
Tech Level: Metal Age	Population Density: Sparse	
Economy: Depressed	Trading Style: Bargain a lot	
Sell: Grow Goo	Buy: Blue Ale*	
Harmony Stones	Sandpit Stalk	
	Pulsating Gummy	
Planet Lifeforms: Pulsating Gummy, Stinging Cone		

Ch-Q-Tss-T	199, 182	Second Planet
Tech Level: Industrial	Population Density: Sparse	
Economy: Level	Trading Style: Bargain a little	
Sell: Fly High Shimmer Cloth	Buy: Wandering Chandelier Funnel Tree Hive Plant	
Planet Lifeforms: Breathing Cactus, Psychic Blaster, Single Leaf, Wandering Chandelier		

The Diul sold us Grow Goo which we took to the Draffa Bastii, a somewhat reserved race of nocturnal creatures on the coreward edge of the region. The Draffa Bastii were so glad to get the Goo that they immediately offered to sell us a Planetary Teleporter.

Humna Humna	202, 105	First Planet
Tech Level: Spacefaring	Population Density: Moderate	
Economy: Depressed	Trading Style: Bargain a lot	
Sell: Vacinall Frywell Laser Cookies	Buy: Livelong* Delightful Fungus Chews Humanoid Hopper Purple Screecher	
Planet Lifeforms: Crystal Sponge Plant, Eight-Legged Rhino, Humanoid Hopper		

Draffa Bastii	241, 164	First Planet
Tech Level: Industrial	Population Density: Moderate	
Economy: Depressed	Trading Style: No Bargaining	
Sell: Planetary Teleporter	Buy: Grow Goo* Psychic Blaster Crystal Sponge Plant	
Planet Lifeforms: Dark Lightning, Black Acid Squirter, Brass Harpooner, Psychic Blaster		

BACK TO STARPORT



ith Starport clear on the other side of the galaxy now, Ptex declared that it would be more cost efficient to use our jump pod to get back home. "Sure," said Rex, "Providing we land where we're supposed to. But I don't have the slightest idea how these things work."

The gravitational effect of stars was supposed to have some bearing on the accuracy of your jump. Ptex, Rex, and Slim began theorizing. What were the possible effects of mass on flux nodes in the space/time continuum? Did non-rotating wormholes differ significantly from those temporarily created by jump pods? What about the tachyonic causality violation? And let's not forget the Zeeman Effect on Penrose diagrams in a gravitational lens...

Several hours passed and we hadn't moved one centimeter closer to Starport. Phloon had fallen asleep and was snoring loudly. I was nearly braindead at the communications board. Fortunately, Grrg'Ah was dusting the ship (she had something of a domestic streak, too) and noticed some instructions pasted to the bottom of the jump pod.

Follow these easy-to-use instructions:

1. Select a destination that's inside a star cluster. The more stars in the vicinity, the better your chances of making a successful jump.
2. Do NOT place the destination target cursor on a star. If you select a star as your destination, you don't know where you'll end up.

CONTAINS TITANIUM, MOLYBDENUM, ALUMINUM, CORN SYRUP,
PARTIALLY HYDROGENATED SOYBEAN OIL, ZINC, TIN LARD

Ptex selected 34, 72 as a destination. The computer gave us a 68% chance of making it — not great, but the best we were going to get for Starport.

We reported to Operations and cleaned up on the rewards for planet recommendations. With the new loot we decked out the *Buttershark* with class 5 everything.

THE MOST VALUABLE THING

W

we were sure the G'Nunk had the Most Valuable Thing — we just had to find out where they were keeping it.

"Make a course for G'Aeresch," said Phloon.

"Can we swing by the Teeelveee and get rid of these stupid Rhinos?" I asked. "They're rolling out into the halls...One came out of stasis and climbed into the bathtub with me!"

"OK," said Phloon, "but let's do it quickly. One brush with madness was enough for a lifetime."

We sold the horny monsters to the Teeelveee and proceeded down to G'Nunk territory. Getting the G'Nunk to tell us where they kept the M.V.T. was easier than we thought. We barely even mentioned shiny green artifacts and they told us they had one on G'Aeresch — in a temple at 2N, 107W.

We landed at the coordinates and found the M.V.T. just sitting there unprotected. There weren't any worshippers clamoring to see the worthless rock, so we did the easy thing and just stole it.

I asked Grrg'Ah if our irreverent (let's face it — criminal) behavior disturbed her.

"Are you kidding?" she said. "Every G'Nunk knows that artifact is sitting there waiting to be pinched. We tell everyone about it *hoping* they'll steal it. That would give us something to go to war over."

The thought of the G'Nunk attacking the Tandelou wasn't exactly unappealing. It certainly might give the Tandelou something else to talk about than Thdok-blah-blah. We stuck the M.V.T. on the dashboard and returned to the Tandelou region.

When the Tandelou saw their beloved hunk of glass, they more or less demanded that we give it back.

"Never stand between a fanatic and his cherished icon," said Phloon. "Beam it over."

Now that the civil war was officially over, we went to talk to Gorzek. He didn't have a lot to tell us about himself. He knew he was older than George Burns (who's *still* playing Vegas back on Old Earth). He figured the Leghk had made him, but he had no idea what his original function was. The Lowar seemed to own Gorzek for a while, but the only thing

they did with him was program him to keep the Tandelou from killing each other.

Gorzek knew a lot about the history of the area, though. He knew that the Lowar originally settled on the fourth planet in the system at 139, 135; the Umanu chose the first planet in the system at 96, 141 as their homeworld. But the most useful thing he told us was the location of Elthesh, the place where the Lowar centered their study of the Leghk: The fourth planet in the system at 84, 176.

ELTHESH (84, 176)

P

tex studied the starmap for a while. "Elthesh is in the nebula," he reported.

Phloon ran a hand over his whiskered face for a moment. "I guess Slim and I can hold on to our marbles long enough for us to get in and out."

"Sure Phloon," I said, slinging a couple of straight-jackets over their chairs.

We entered the swirling cloud and made a course for Elthesh. The system wasn't too far in, so Slim and Phloon's paranoid outbursts were held to a minimum. Phloon set the ship down on the highest point of the largest island — that's where the Arla said the research center was.

We found it in a heap of rubble at 28N, 45E. Some poor scholar had scribbled a note saying that they had confirmed the existence of the Halls of Memory, a place that housed the cumulative learning of the entire Leghk civilization. The problem: they didn't know which system it was in. They knew that the Halls of Memory were at 26S, 135E in an A class star system that formed an equilateral triangle with the "Hook" and the "six yellow stones." It was obvious where the Hook constellation was...but the six yellow stones?

"Perhaps those aboard the *Elthar-Esh* will be able to answer the question....," the note said.

"They can't now," snorted Phloon. "But we know they solved the riddle by going through the singularity. I bet we'll learn that way."

NIDBERRIES

E

lthesh was near the Hook constellation, which was dangerously close to the Dweenle and severe depression for all of us. The crew certainly didn't want to talk to them again. But I could tell what Phloon was thinking.

"Well," said Phloon, "We've got these Nidberries, and the Dweenle aren't far from here..."

We nearly mutinied. After some heated discussion, we finally agreed to go talk to them — but only if Grrg'Ah could eat any Dweenle that strayed onto our ship.

We offered the teeny bush to the first Dweenle ship we came across — and hoped they wouldn't ask about the late Dr. Prutzoop. They didn't; instead they told us all about their past.

Once upon a time, a million years ago or so, the Dweenle and the Leghk lived peacefully together in this region. Then an evil demon came along and possessed some of the Leghk and made them attack the Dweenle and their Leghk brothers. The Dweenle — harder to stamp out than cockroaches — somehow survived. But the Leghk weren't so lucky — they died in a horrible war with their evil half. Some other weird stuff happened: the cloud was formed along with the shyneum planet, and the anomaly appeared. Just before the end, the good Leghk created a powerful guardian satellite to keep the knowledge stored in the Halls of Memory from the bad Leghk. To get past this guardian, you needed a "key transmitter."

This was all well and dandy, but we wanted to know where the Halls of Memory were and where we could find the key transmitter. Well, the Dweenle didn't know. That was millions of years ago, and their memories were short.

INTO THE PAST

W

e returned to Starport and bought jump pods and blastopods for our trip through the singularity. Ptex said we should stop by the Tandelou planet and buy as much fuel as we could carry — we didn't want to be a second

Elthar-Esh.

The anomaly was at 244, 149 — clear on the other side of the cloud. Fortunately, the Humna Humna had told us about a flux node at 69, 134 that took you on an express ride to 173, 164.

Ng-Kher-Arla ships were patrolling the area around the singularity. It was their Kher phase, a time when they believe that the universe is just an illusion. You have to be careful around anyone who thinks you're just an illusion. They may not see any reason to hurt you, since you don't exist — then again, they may not see any reason *not* to hurt you, either.

I waited for the Kher to hail us. The best tactic, I discovered, was to keep my mouth shut and let them talk. They told us, among other useless things, that if one couldn't find what one was looking for on a certain planet, one might look on another planet in a small nebula. They also mentioned that one might keep in mind that two triangles can share a single edge.

Phloon rolled up his eyes. "'One' might mention that 'one' may not know what the hell 'one' is talking about," he said, "Let's get out of here."

Grrg'Ah insisted that we raise our shields before entering the anomaly. I thought she was just being her usual paranoid G'Nunk self, but those raised shields probably saved our lives. The trip through the anomaly put a considerable strain on the ship — without our shields up, we probably would've bit it. It also cost us a whole 50 cubic meters of fuel.

When we came out on the other side, our clocks were all screwy but our coordinates were the same. We realized we were in the same region — only there was no nebula! I remembered the Arla estimating that the cloud was created almost a million years ago. Were we that far in the past?

"There's the six yellow stones," said Ptex, pointing to a constellation that was roughly in what was now — or would become — the center of the nebula.

Slim drew a line from the six stones to the Hook cluster. He gazed at the starmap for several minutes, looking for an A-class system that could be the third point on the triangle.

"There!" he cried. "The Tarn system!"

Our riddle-solving session came to an end when we came under attack. Obviously these were the possessed Leghk, and they weren't friendly to tourists. Phloon decided there was no reason to stick around in the past and beg for a blasting — if we were going to die, we were going to die in our own time. We dropped back into the anomaly and prayed that the *Buttershark* could weather the storm.

TARN REVISITED

W

e returned to the Tarn planet and landed at 26S, 135E. A small structure of beautiful, translucent green stone stood before us.

"Lowarian," said Slim. "This can't be the Halls of Memory."

"Let's explore it anyway," said Phloon.

We stepped cautiously inside. Buried beneath the debris was a message from the captain of the *Elthar-Esh*.

"Nine days we have spent here trying to figure out where we could have gone wrong," the perplexed Lowarian captain wrote. "The Halls of Memory should be here. This is the A-class star that forms the triangle. Of course, I suppose if there happened to be..."

"...Another triangle," added Slim, catching on. "Remember, the Kher said that two triangles could share the same side. They also said something about a small nebula."

Ptex checked the starmap — there was a tiny nebula on the upspin edge of the region that could form another equilateral triangle with the Hook and the six yellow stones.

HALLS OF MEMORY (131, 219)

W

hen we got to the tiny nebula, we found a single A-class star system at 131, 219. A quick scan told us there were sentients on the frozen planet — and that the guardian satellite was still in place.

The encounter alarm sounded the minute we pulled into orbit. Slim did a Sensor reading of the satellite — the thing was 91 times the size of our ship! At least it wasn't armed. I tried hailing the guardian on all frequencies, but we got no reply. The thing looked deader than a Dweenle's doorknob.

"Blow it up," said Phloon with a yawn. One laser shot later the vigilant guardian satellite was not-so-vigilant scrap metal. (20 units of shyneum and 17 units of promethium, to be exact.)

A trade buoy orbiting the planet informed us that Spemin now lived on the planet. Well, we'd dealt with them before — if you kept moving, they didn't stand a chance of hitting you.

The Halls of Memory were a big disappointment. Inside its crumbling remnants there were no artifacts in need of liberation, no wizened old hermit holding the key to the whole puzzle, no mini-mart selling soft drinks...Our mission was beginning to look terribly futile until Ptex hit on the idea of coming back to this planet again — only in the past.

BACK INTO THE PAST

Y

our idea is good, Ptex," I said, "but this won't be easy. The guardian satellite isn't going to be the same defunct space junk we saw a little while ago. How were we going to get past it?"

"The Dweenle said that they had the guardian key or at least once knew where it was," remembered Rex. "We'll have to talk to them while we're in the past."

"Does their Nidberry fetish go back a million years?" asked Phloon. We figured it was probably something central to their character — like rheumatism and gas pain. It seemed like a big bother to have to travel all

the way to the Arrow cluster to gather more bushes, but better safe than stupid.

The trip through the anamoly was the same gut-wrenching, shy-neum-sucking experience it was before. We arrived in the past to find our ship once again assaulted by the possessed Leghk. Apparently our alien mystique pissed them off more than it intrigued them. Rather than let them gain some satisfaction from chasing us around and shooting at us, we used a jump pod to go directly to the Dweenle.

ANOTHER DATE WITH THE DWEENLE



he Dweenle commander in our view screen sighed a deep sigh, then sighed again. He checked his pulse, ascertaining that he wasn't dead yet, and continued.

"Well, I suppose none of this really matters much," he said.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?"

I was sure I didn't, but duty is duty. "I'm terribly interested, Captain Harwah" I replied, "Really, I am."

The Dweenle added a few details to the story we'd already heard. A being named 'Uhl' had come and perverted the less intelligent of the Leghk so that they became hostile to anybody without a scowl on his face. To protect the other races from the 'Uhl Leghk,' the remaining Leghk created a guardian satellite to watch over the powerful knowledge stored in the Halls of Memory. Only someone with the guardian key could get past the satellite.

The last good Leghk hid the key to the satellite somewhere in this huge region. Knowing that he too would fall to Uhl's power, he told the Dweenle the location of the key and promptly killed himself.

"The Leghk who told us the location of the key told it to us in the form of a riddle, thinking we'd be too stupid to figure it out," Harwah told us, "I suppose he was right. Anyway, here's the riddle he left with us:

*Round a fallen star of four
Is a world of humming stones
Here where nothing meets nothing
The transmitter awaits our return*

"Pretty stupid riddle, huh?"

Where was there a "fallen star" in a constellation of four? We looked to the map. There seemed to be only one possibility — the star at 106, 14 appeared more or less to have "fallen" downspin from a row of stars. Slim checked his records — well, we'd certainly logged a planet in that system.

The last thing Harwah said was that another ship had come asking the same questions we did (he added that they were nicer than us — not a big surprise). It had to be the *Elthar-Esh*. The Lowar had left the Dweenle with some shyneum, which they gave to us. Ugly irony, I thought, since the *Elthar-Esh* ended up a floating tomb for want of a few cubic meters of shyneum.

GUARDIAN TRANSMITTER KEY

A painful silence lay over the ship, occasionally broken by the tiny shrieks of a pulsating gummy Grrg'Ah was torturing out of boredom. We hung above the planet, wondering where we should land. Phloon sat with his mouth shut tightly and his hands fidgeting in his pockets — his usual posture when he was deep in thought. Suddenly he yanked his hands from his pockets and threw his arms up in the air. "Let's just land and start looking," he said.

Phloon punched at his captain's console. The auto-pilot computer dutifully filled the screen with a map of the planet. He paused for a moment, hoping that some small but significant fact, some peculiar land feature, would call out the location of the guardian key.

The planet stared back coldly.

In frustration, Phloon left the site selection part to the computer and hit the button to descend. "Better to make no decision than a bad decision," he said.

We landed exactly at 0,0. From the ship, we spotted the ruins of a delicately crafted building.

"Freakish luck!" gasped Phlooon.

"Hardly," said Slim, "0,0 — where nothing meets nothing. Get it?"

We piled into the terrain vehicle and rumbled over to the ruins. Inside was a message from the captain of the *Elthar-Esh* — underneath it, the guardian transmitter key.

THE LEGHK

T

he guardian satellite recognized our key and let us pass. We dropped down to 26S, 135E and found the Halls of Memory in all of their domed glory. Inside, a handful of Leghk were floating dejectedly before one of their last meals.

"Look what we have here," said a Leghk with less excitement than guilt, "More visitors from the future. If we haven't completely ruined your lives, much less your civilization, you're more than welcome to sit down with us and eat. I'm afraid we only have a few paltry rations left: some mashed Screepa bugs, and a little Drixian fish wine to keep the cold away. Help yourself, though, by all means. We won't be needing it for long, I assure you."

The Leghk told us all about the Uhl and what they were doing to combat him. The Uhl, the Leghk explained, was a tremendously big being — as big as a bread box if bread boxes were zillions of parsecs long. He/it had numerous nerve centers, or ganglion, connected by faint electromagnetic waves. Sentient activity disrupted these waves and "hurt" the Uhl. To combat this, the Uhl possessed the individuals of one sentient lifeform and used them to attack other sentients in much the same way that antibodies attack bacteria and toxins.

"Here, have a Data Cube," the Leghk offered. "It contains almost all of our technical knowledge. Take this half of the Uhl Weapon, too."

"The Uhl Weapon?" I asked.

"Yes, the Uhl Weapon, a device we made to create a massive disruption of the Uhl's electromagnetic field. There are two halves to the device. Unfortunately, we only have one half. We lost the powerful artificial

intelligence that makes up the other half — that was on another planet that the Uhl's Leghk took over."

"Where's that planet?" I asked.

"Beats me," said the Leghk.

Phloon was already pulling on my arm. "I know where it is," he said, "or at least where it will be. In any case, we've got to get back to the future."

GORZEK REVISITED

A

s soon as we disembarked in Starport, a buzzing crowd of technicians in white lab coats whisked the Data Cube from our hands and proceeded to a laboratory, slamming the door tightly behind them. Several hours went by, and the buzzing crowd reemerged pushing several strange, alien artifacts. White lab coats began crawling from one end of the *Buttershark* to the other, removing our missile launchers and shield units and tossing them into the junk pile. Two massive plasma bolt weapons were installed on both port and starboard sides while new shield units were fitted along the perimeter of the ship. Finally, a strange tetrahedron-shaped artifact was wheeled into the ship's hold and given several hundred power-cord life-lines. This was a phasing artifact just like the ones the Spemin had — Rex quaintly called it our battle jumper.

Phloon boarded holding a credit card good for 100,000 SP. I guess Interstel thought completing half of our mission objectives was barely worth more than a couple colony recommendations. Well, we didn't care. We had the slickest ship in the region, an equal to anything the Spemin or Umanu had, and enough cash to fill our cargo pods with shyneum. Only one more thing kept us from finding the shyneum planet and killing the Uhl — the other half of the anti-Uhl artifact.

Phloon had rightly guessed that the other half of the Uhl Weapon was our binary friend, Gorzek. When we went to him, he immediately sensed that we had his other half — the hardware that would make him a complete fighting machine. He beamed himself aboard and somehow joined his brains with the Uhl weapon's brawn. Rex installed a trigger device on Phloon's control panel that read 'Uhl Weapon' — we'd be ready if the Uhl stuck his ugly ganglion in our direction.

INTO THE CLOUD

W

e had no idea where the shyneum planet was, but we now felt powerful enough to travel through the cloud. Aside from Elthesh, we only knew the locations of two worlds in the cloud — the home planets of the Lowar and the

Umanu.

"We know a trip through the Umanu world won't be a Sunday drive," said Phloon. "Let's put off our inevitable demise and check out the Lowar world, first."

We flew into the cloud with shields raised and weapons armed. We were now viruses in the Uhl's body — "a stomach flu" I wished aloud. Like good anti-bodies, the Umanu patrolled in great numbers, ruthlessly determined to kill anything that didn't look or smell Umanu. The battle jumper alone saved us from the flurry missiles and microwaves that we now began to associate with the sound of the encounter alarm. There was no use fighting their endless fleets. It seemed much more prudent to evade their weapons and run away at top speed.

The Lowar's former home world at 139, 135 was no oasis in the eerie cloud. The system was thick with rabid Umanu warships. We outran all of them and pulled into orbit around the fourth planet in the system.

A beacon on the planet surface called to us. In some ruins we found a final message from an anonymous Lowar stating that they didn't hold anything against their Umanu brothers because "we know it was not really they who destroyed us." As if to underscore who the culprit was, the author wrote: "Beware the shyneum planet in the system 117, 153. There resides an awful thing."

FINAL BATTLE

W

e set off to the Shyneum planet to meet the "awful thing" and quite possibly our own deaths. The Shyneum system was crawling with Umanu fleets. We jetted past all of them and made for the shyneum planet. As we entered orbit,

Slim and Phloon dropped to the floor. They looked worse than usual — catatonic, actually. We didn't have time to worry about them, though — Umanu ships were buzzing around us, ready to cook us like microwave popcorn. Rather than heroically endure the battle and risk our lives unnecessarily, we nullified their shields and fried the lot with a blasto pod. The few that survived were easy to mop up.

The Uhl showed up, and he wasn't pleased. Manifesting himself in this dimension was a big effort — by his own admission, our little intrusion was costing him thousands of years of meditation. That was pretty impressive, I thought, but the Uhl wasn't amused — he said he'd have to absorb us. With that, the *Buttershark* shuddered and lurched forward. The Uhl began to draw us in.

We panicked, of course. I did a sensor reading. "His shields are 10 to the zillionth power," I yelled, "We'll never get past them."

I ran to the captain's console — the Uhl Weapon button was flashing bright red. "Sick him, Gorzek," I yelled, slamming my palm on the button. The Uhl Weapon bolted like a dog off its tether.

Uhl and Uhl Weapon circled each other, energy crackling between them in an impressive display of zap-crackle-pop. I monitored the battle's progress — the Uhl's magnificent shields were quickly being pared down.

Suddenly, the Uhl Weapon exploded into a thousand points of light. For a few moments, we stood stunned — now it was just us and an understandably upset Uhl.

With a bright flash, the communications board lit up. The Uhl was hailing us on all frequencies.

"I guess you want to reconsider this entire business about absorbing us," I said. He begged us to cut a deal with him. If we let him go, he would manifest on a different plane and never bother us again.

"Should we let this guy walk?" I asked the others. "If it makes a difference, his shields are down to class 19."

We looked at each other with an unmistakable look that said, "Toast him." Ptex began launching one bolt after another.

Without warning, my body was wracked with intense pain. The screams of the others filled the bridge, too — the Uhl was attacking us all with some sort of mind weapon. Phloon and Slim sucked in their last breaths and bit it on the spot — the price you have to pay for being the wrong species at the wrong time. I swooned in and out of consciousness, the cries of Ptex and Rex drifting in and out as they lashed the Uhl with bolt after bolt. The Uhl's shields dropped, and faded, and finally disappeared with a sputter. Two more shots and the alien was vaporized as sure as gravity sucks.

THE END

The four of us — Ptex, Rex, Grrg'Ah and I — gave Phloon and Slim a burial in space. It was going to be a little less lively on the bridge without the hairless apes. Actually, everything seemed kind of anti-climactic after destroying the Uhl, freeing the Umanu, thumbing our nose at the Spemin, and saving every Arthling from a life of servitude to a blob. As full-blown creatures of action, we'd have to move on to newer frontiers, graver threats, bloodier battles...

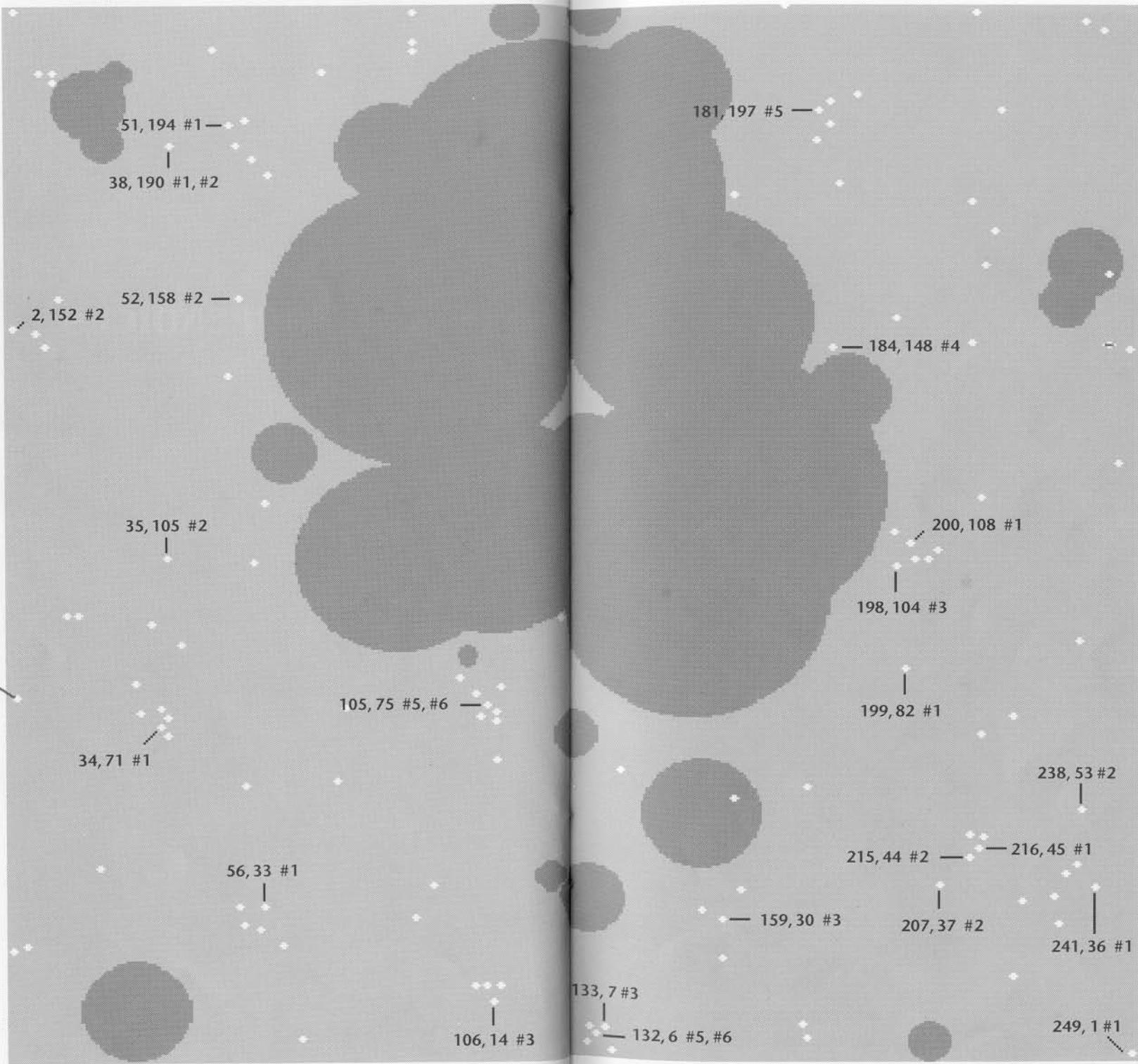
We talked it over and decided to go our separate ways. Ptex foresaw wild profits in the fuel trade that was about to explode now that the shyneum planet was free — in fact, his company, Ptexaco, now dominates the galaxy.

Rex went off to study theology with the Tandelou. He was always suspiciously quiet whenever we ridiculed Thdok and his followers. I guess beneath that hard engineer exoskeleton there was a mystic waiting to be born again.

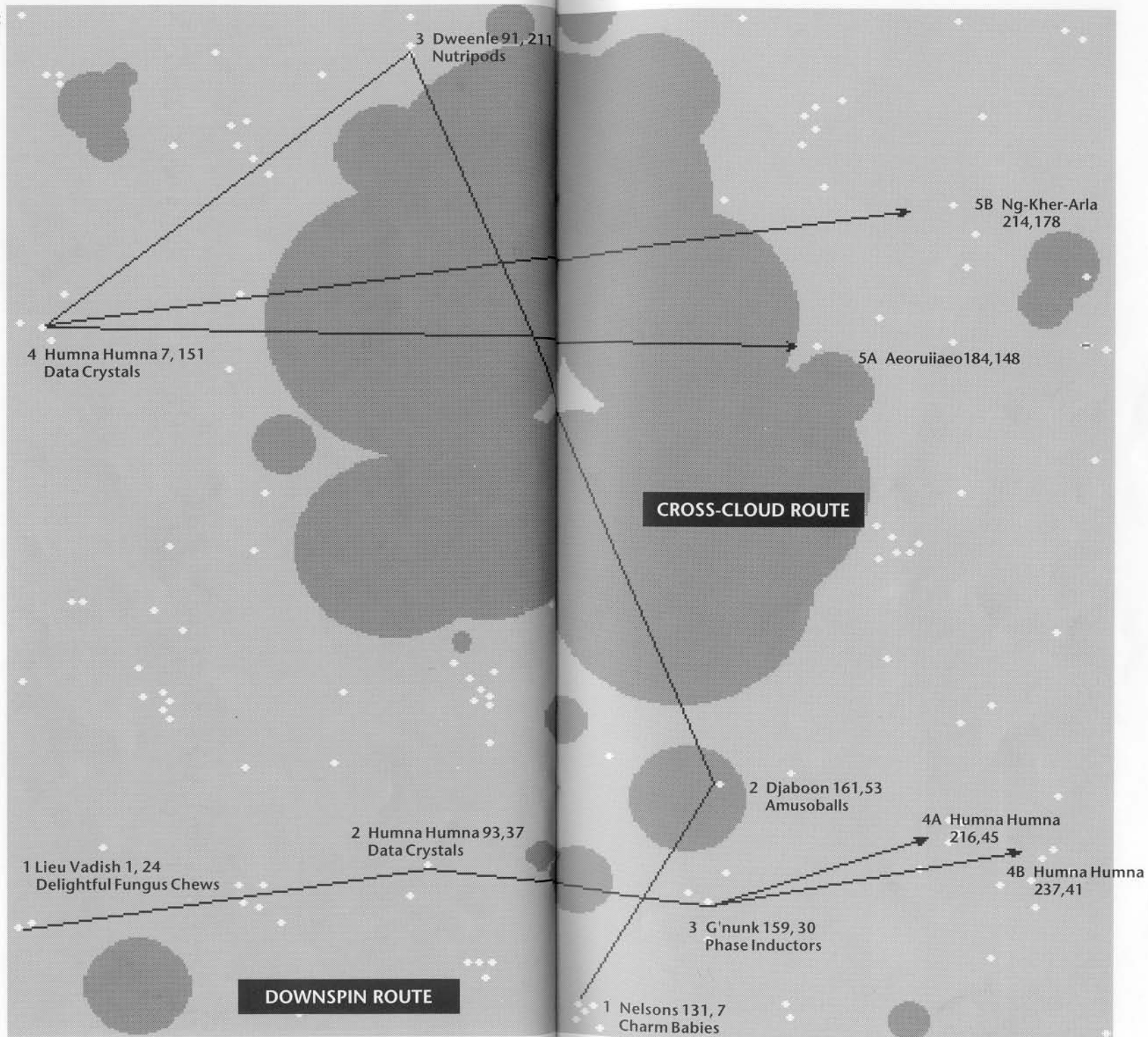
As for Grrg'Ah and I, we decided to run off and conquer the universe together. The last battle had hurled us into each other's arms — and we realized we were young and in love. She wasn't exactly the spacemate I'd always dreamed of, but she was gutsier than most and had curves that turned more than a few heads in roadside cantinas. Besides, Mom always wanted me to marry a doctor.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Colonizable Planets



Appendix B: Trade Route Maps



CIRCLE ROUTE

2 Nathrachch 181, 197
Important Secrets

3 Humna Humna 239, 216
Data Crystals

5A Nathrachch

4 Kher
Dreamgrids

5B Aeoruiiaeo

1 Aeoruiiaeo 184, 148
Mip Fur

SHORT ROUTE

3 Humna Humna 237, 88

2 Djaboon 161, 53
Fire Gems

1 Nelsons 131, 7
Charm Babies

NGA-SENG ROUTE

1 Aeoruillaeo 184, 148
Mip Fur

4 Draffa Basti
241, 164

3 Nga-Seng-Diul 203, 106
Grow Goo

2 Nga-Seng-Kler 201, 105
Blue Ale

18 Ch-Q-Tss 199, 82
Shimmer Cloth

2 Teeelveee 125, 95
Singing Beetles

3 Tarn 54, 104
Screech Harps

1A Tandelou Eshvara
35, 69 Happy Juice

TWO-HEADED ROUTE

4 Mbe 64, 6

APPENDIX C:

G'NUNK WARSHIP MANUAL

Dweenle Transport

Shield: None

Armor: Class 1

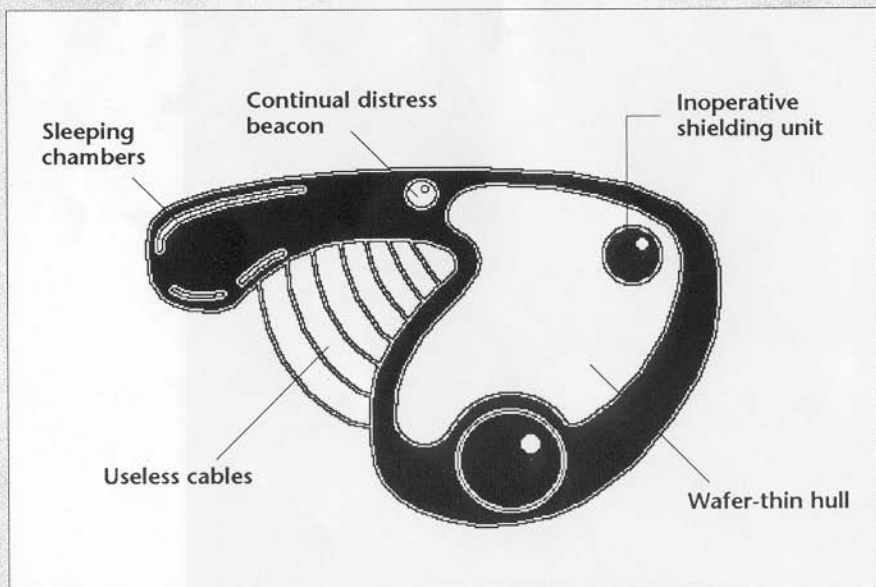
Laser: None

Missile: None

Firing Rate: Not Applicable

Elements: Lead 11.0

Shyneum: 3.0



Tandelou Scout

Shield: Class 1

Armor: None

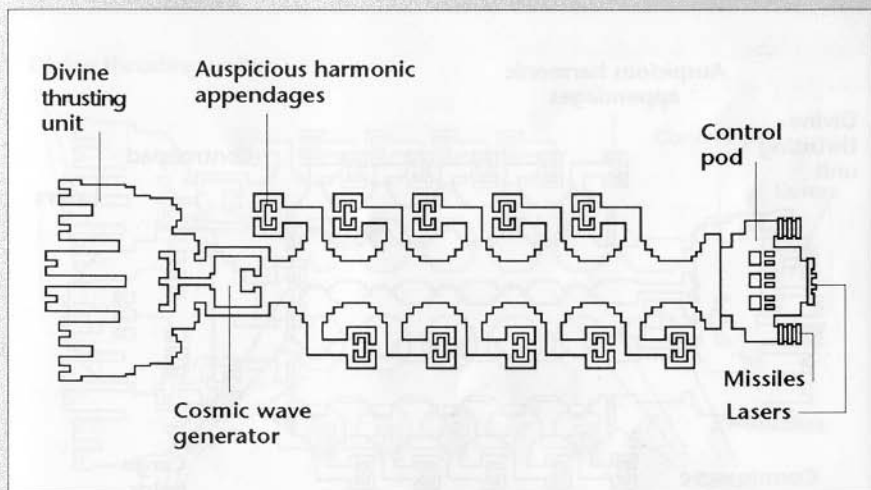
Laser: Class 3

Missile: Class 2

Firing Rate: Moderate

Elements: Nickel 4.0, Molybdenum 2.0, Platinum 1.0

Shyneum: 3.0



Tandelou Transport

Shield: Class 1

Armor: None

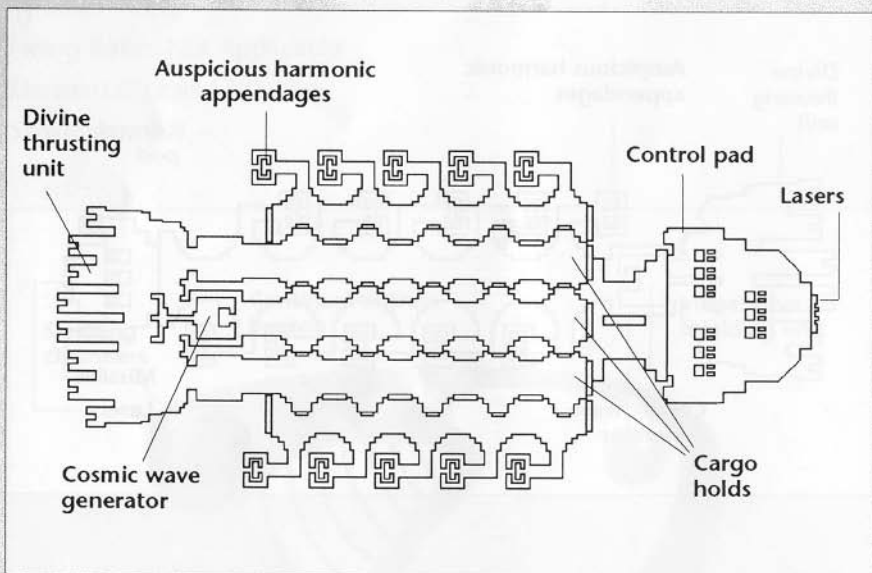
Laser: Class 2

Missile: None

Firing Rate: Slow

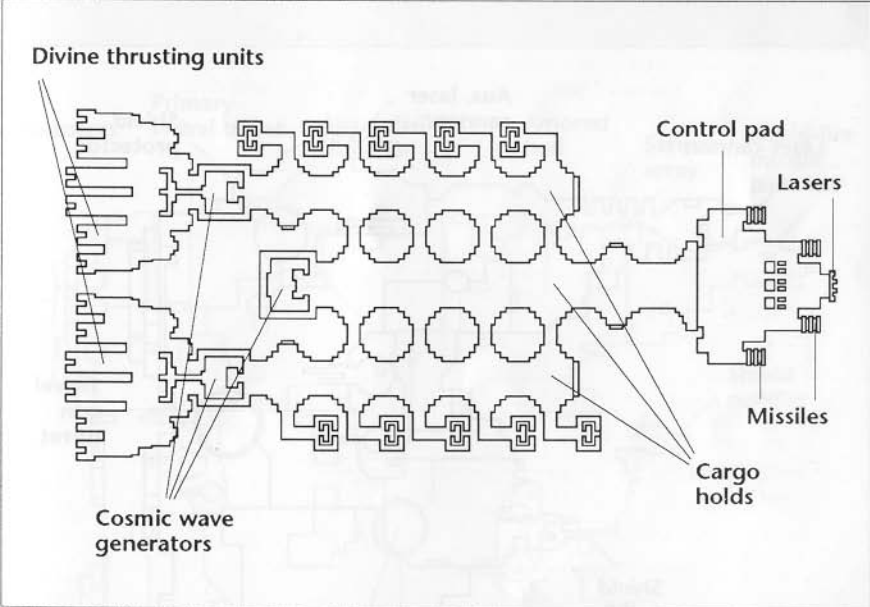
Elements: Nickel 9.0, Molybdenum 6.0, Platinum 3.0

Shyneum: 5.0



Tandelou Warship

- Shield: Class 2
- Armor: Class 1
- Laser: Class 4
- Missile: Class 3
- Firing Rate: Moderate
- Elements: Nickel 8.0, Molybdenum 4.0, Platinum 2.0
- Shyneum: 4.0



G'Nunk Scout

Shield: Class 2

Armor: Class 2

Laser: Class 4

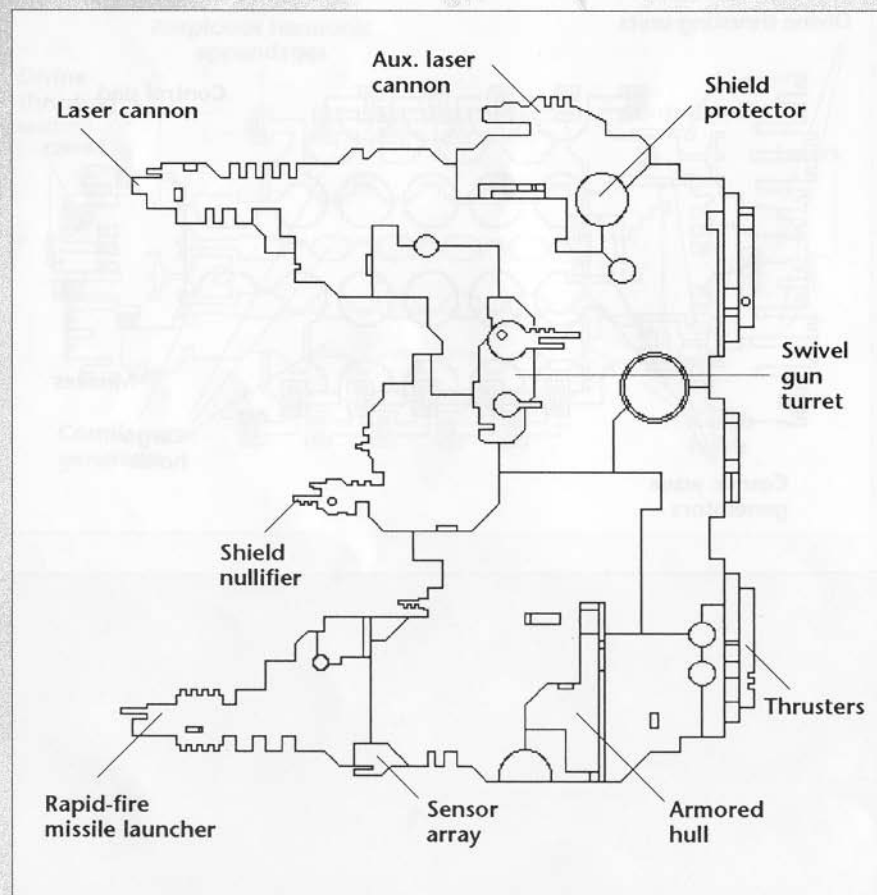
Missile: Class 5

Firing Rate: Fast

Elements: Chromium 10.0, Cobalt 4.0, Endurium 3.0

Shyneum: Not Applicable

Special: Shield Nullifier



G'Nunk Warship

Shield: Class 6

Armor: Class 4

Laser: Class 5

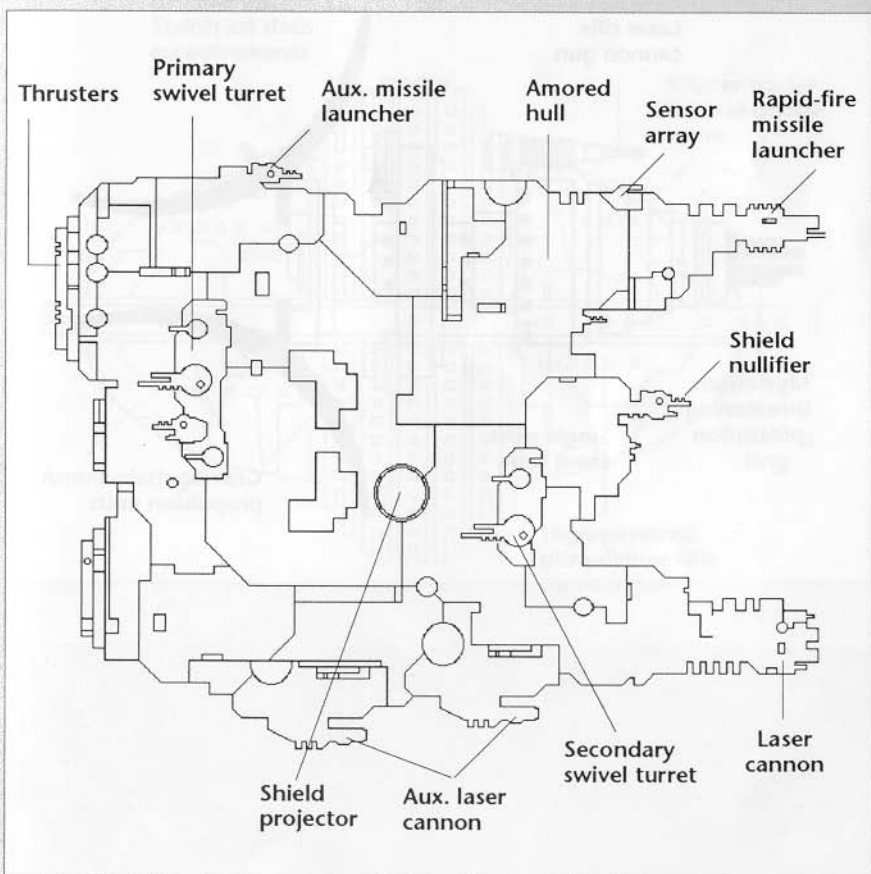
Missile: Class 10

Firing Rate: Very Fast

Elements: Cobalt 8.0, Titanium 5.0, Endurium 5.0

Shyneum: Not Applicable

Special: Shield Nullifier



Humna Humna Scout

Shield: Class 1

Armor: None

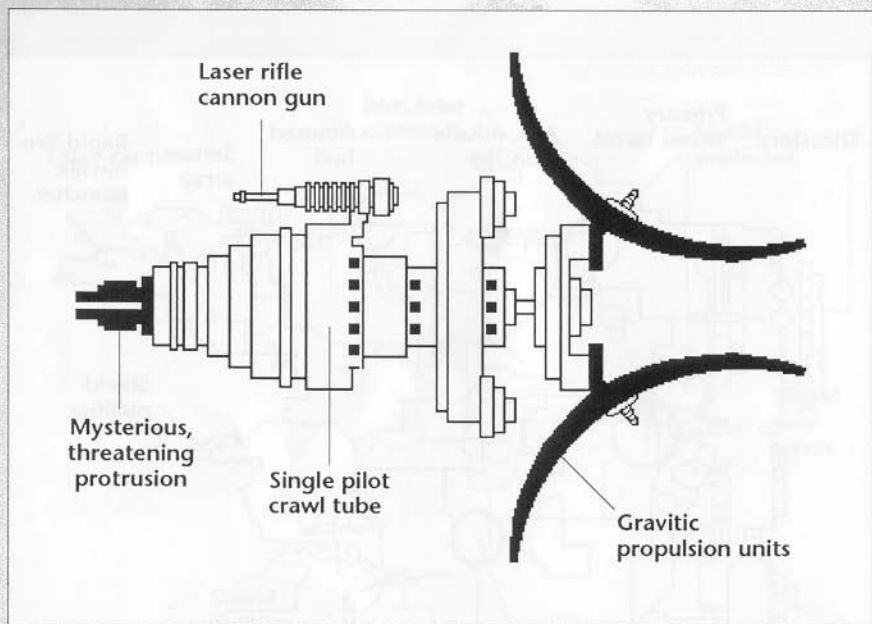
Laser: Class 7

Missile: None

Firing Rate: Fast

Elements: Aluminum 8.0, Antimony 5.0, Zinc 4.0

Shyneum: 0.5



Humna Humna Transport

Shield: Class 2

Armor: Class 4

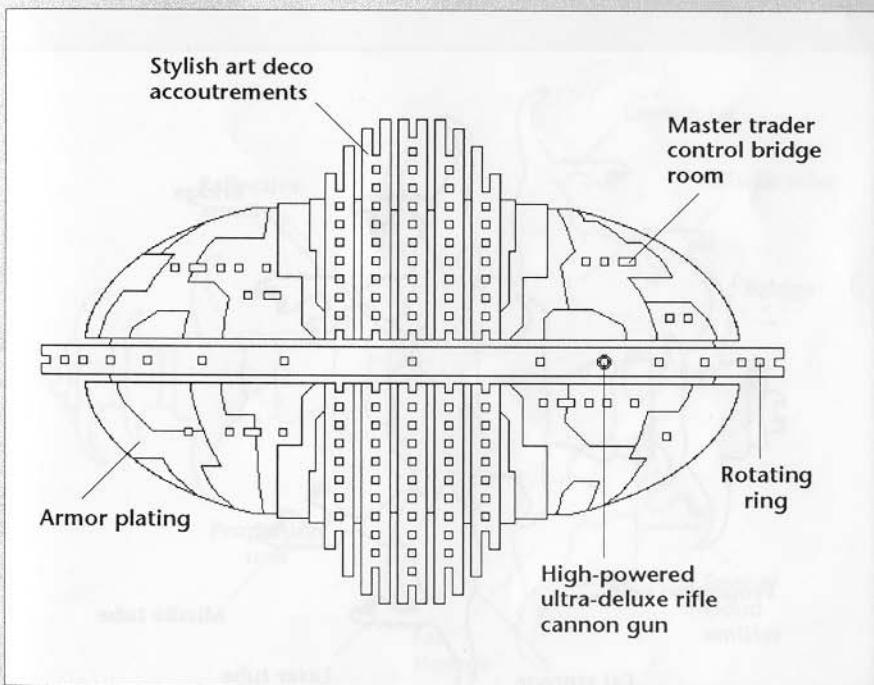
Laser: Class 12

Missile: Class 4

Firing Rate: Moderate

Elements: Aluminum 20.0, Antimony 9.0, Zinc 5.0

Shyneum: 15.0



Ng-Kher-Arla Scout

Shield: Class 2

Armor: Class 1

Laser: Class 3

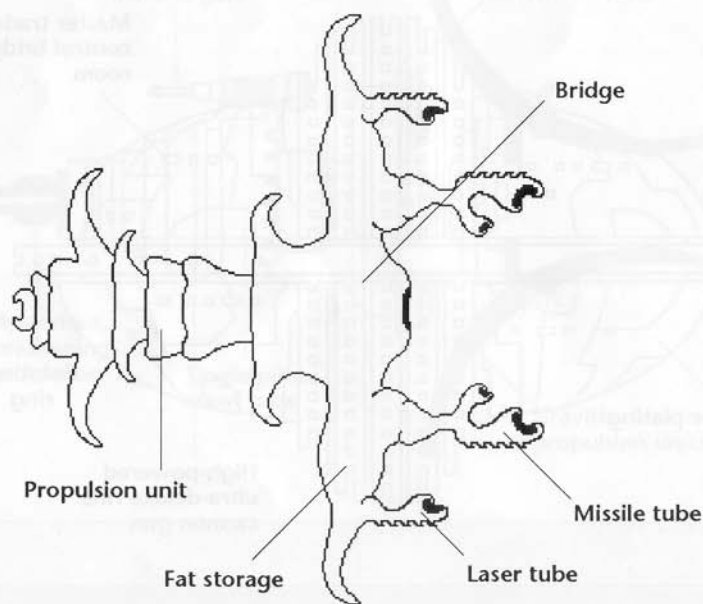
Missile: Class 3

Firing Rate: Slow

Elements: Molybdenum 2.0, Silver 0.5, Zinc 0.2

Shyneum: 1.0

Special: Reflective Armor



Ng-Kher-Arla Warship

Shield: Class 3

Armor: Class 2

Laser: Class 5

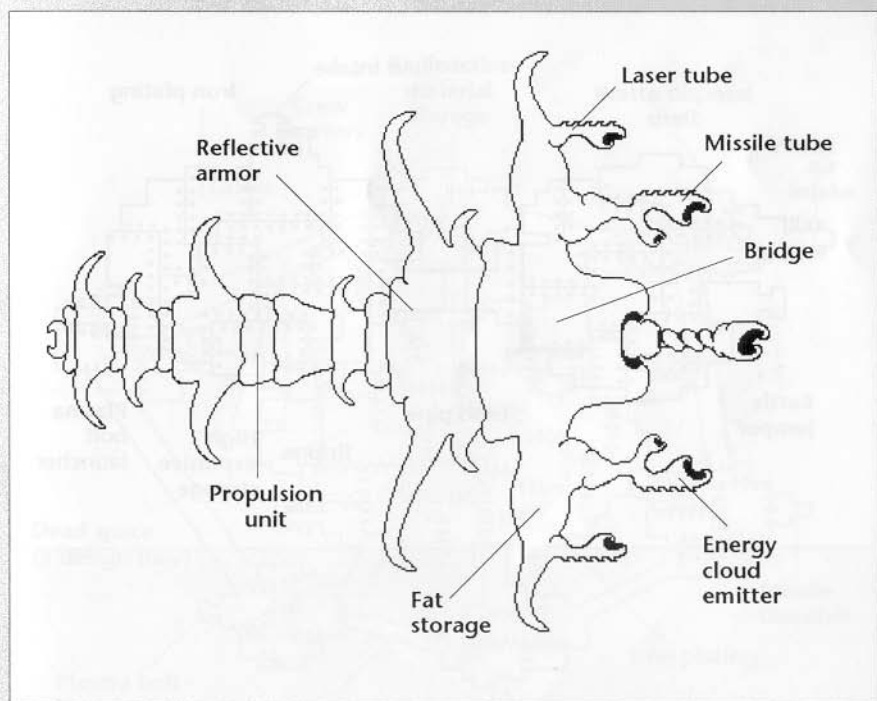
Missile: Class 5

Firing Rate: Moderate

Elements: Molybdenum 4.0, Silver 1.0, Magnesium 0.8

Shyneum: 2.5

Special: Reflective Armor, Energy Cloud



Spemin Scout

Shield: Class 5

Armor: Class 1

Laser: Class 2

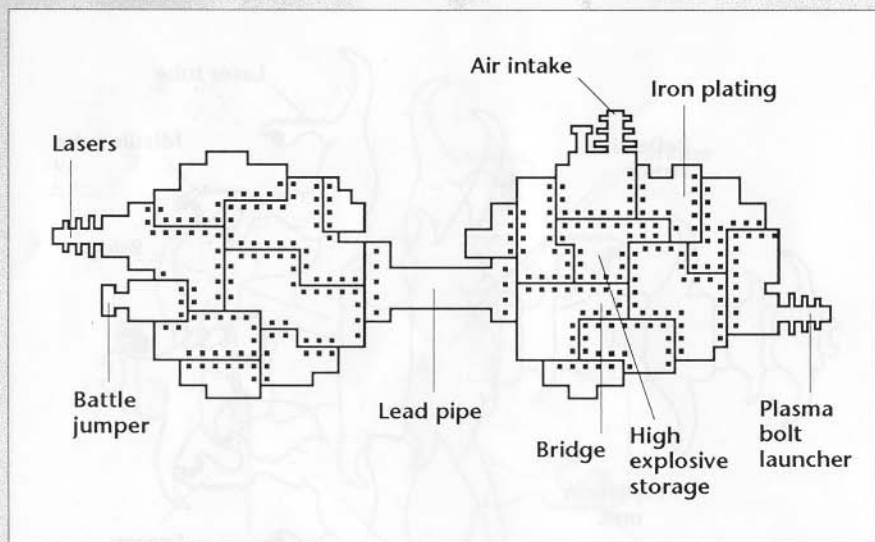
Missile: None

Firing Rate: Very Slow

Elements: Lead 6.0, Iron 4.0

Shyneum: 1.0

Special: Battle Jumper, Plasma Bolts, Shields effective in nebula



Spemin Warship

Shield: Class 8

Armor: Class 1

Laser: Class 2

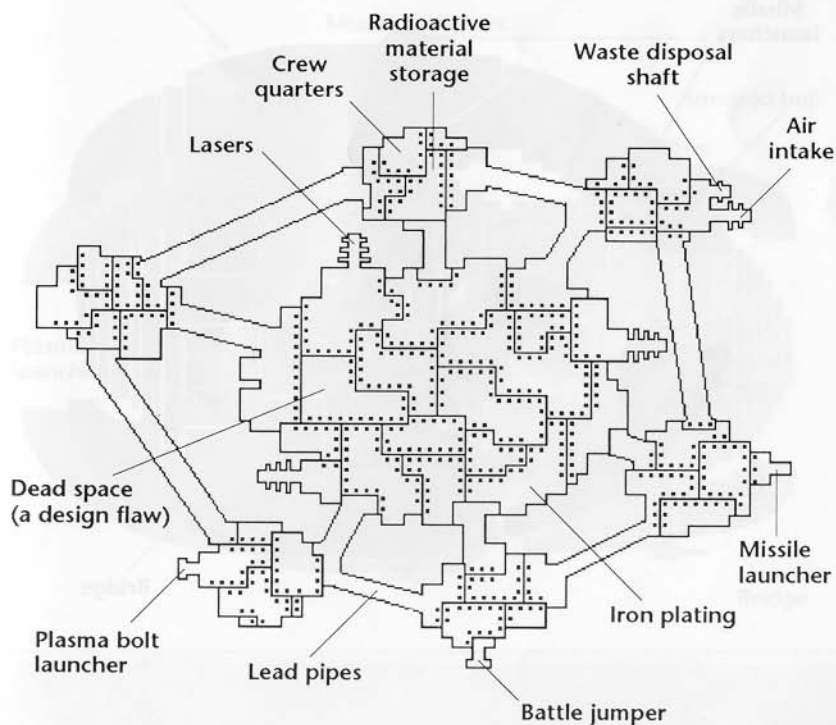
Missile: Class 1

Firing Rate: Slow

Elements: Lead 10.0, Iron 7.0, Cobalt 2.0

Shyneum: 5.0

Special: Battle Jumper, Plasma Bolts, Shields effective in nebula



Uhlek Scout

Shield: Class 2

Armor: Class 2

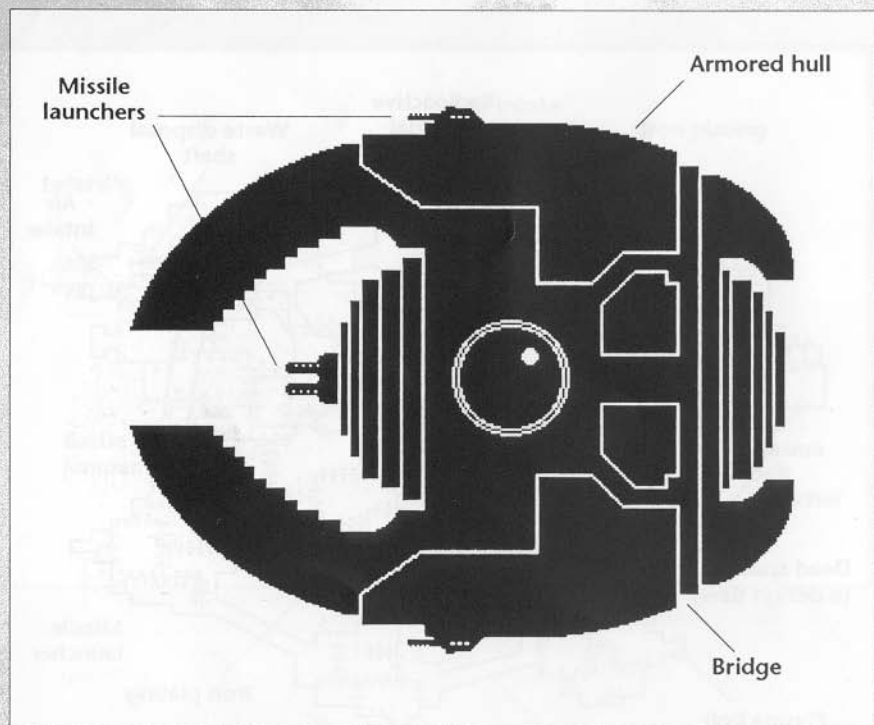
Laser: None

Missile: Class 5

Firing Rate: Fast

Elements: Aluminum 14.0, Titanium 11.0, Endurium 20.0

Shyneum: Not Applicable



Uhlek Warship

Shield: Class 8

Armor: Class 2

Laser: None

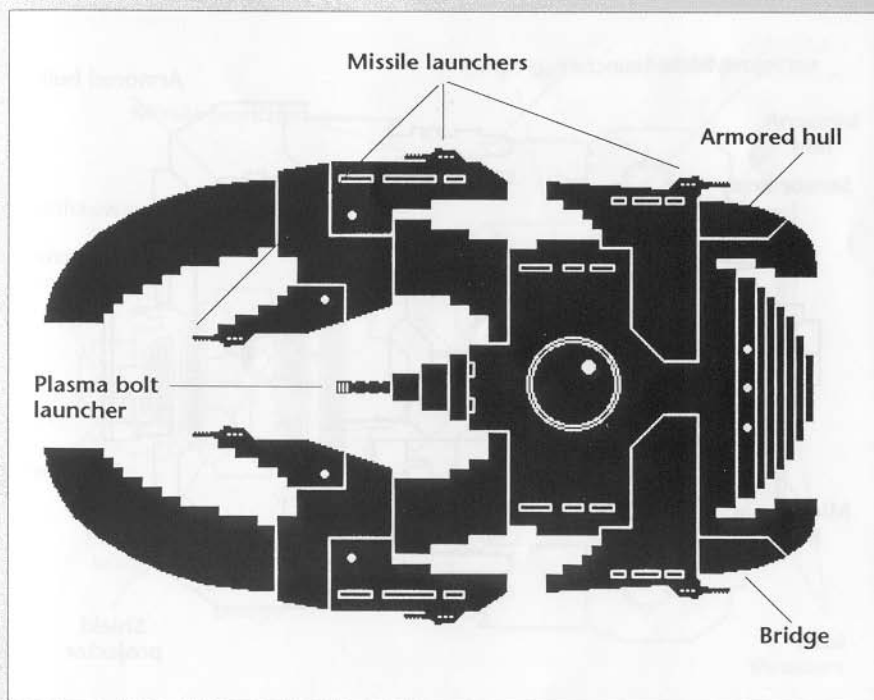
Missile: Class 5

Firing Rate: Fast

Elements: Aluminum 19.0, Titanium 14.0, Endurium 25.0

Shyneum: Not Applicable

Special: Plasma Bolts



Umanu Scout

Shield: Class 5

Armor: Class 3

Laser: None

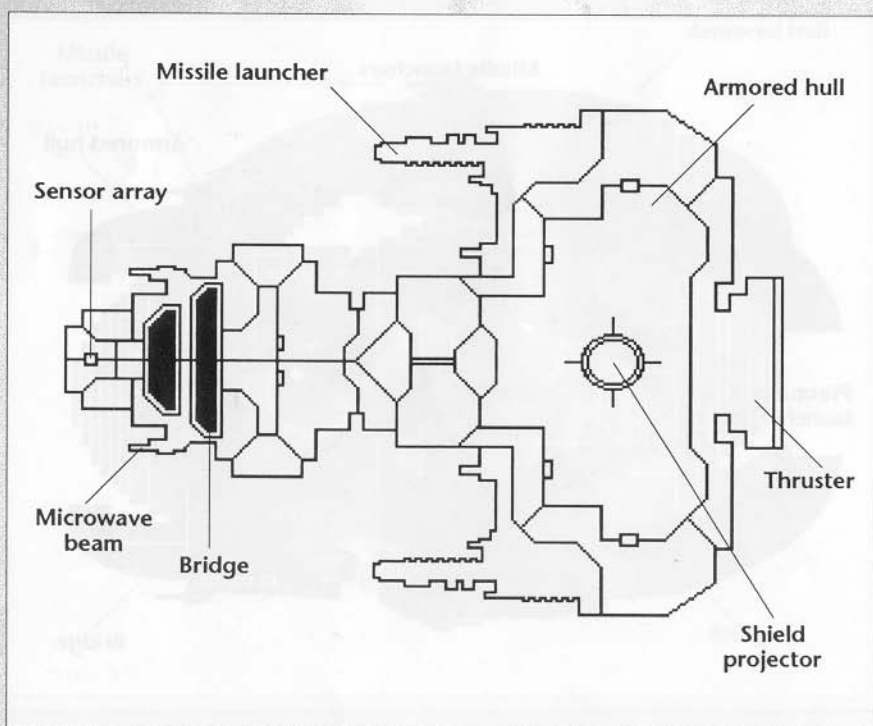
Missile: Class 9

Firing Rate: Moderate

Elements: Tungsten 20.0, Titanium 10.0, Platinum 7.0

Shyneum: 20.0

Special: Microwave Beam, Cloaking Device



Umanu Warship

Shield: Class 7

Armor: Class 5

Laser: None

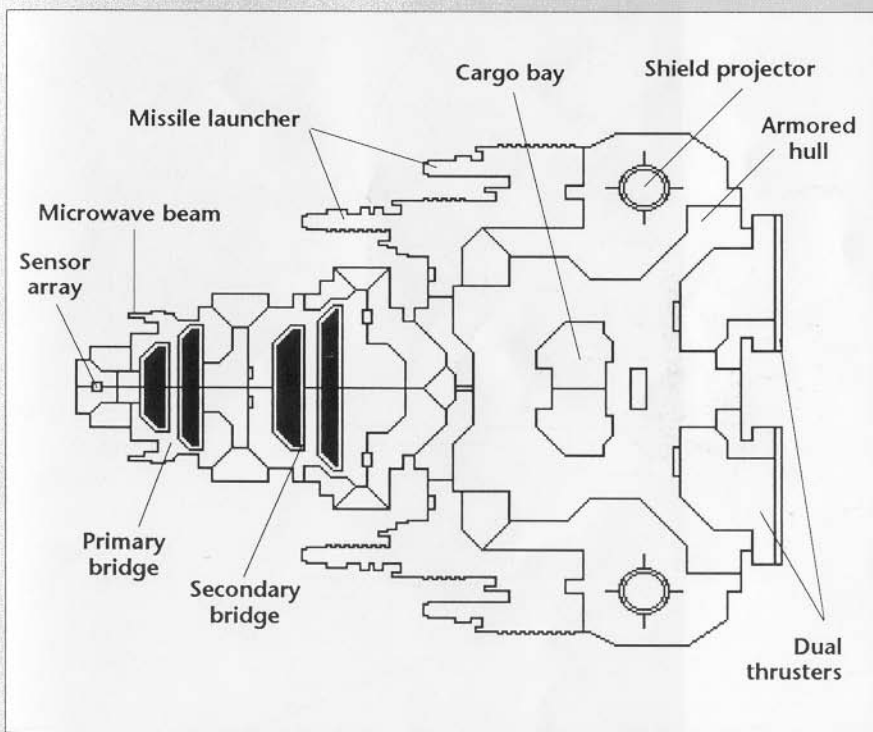
Missile: Class 9

Firing Rate: Moderate

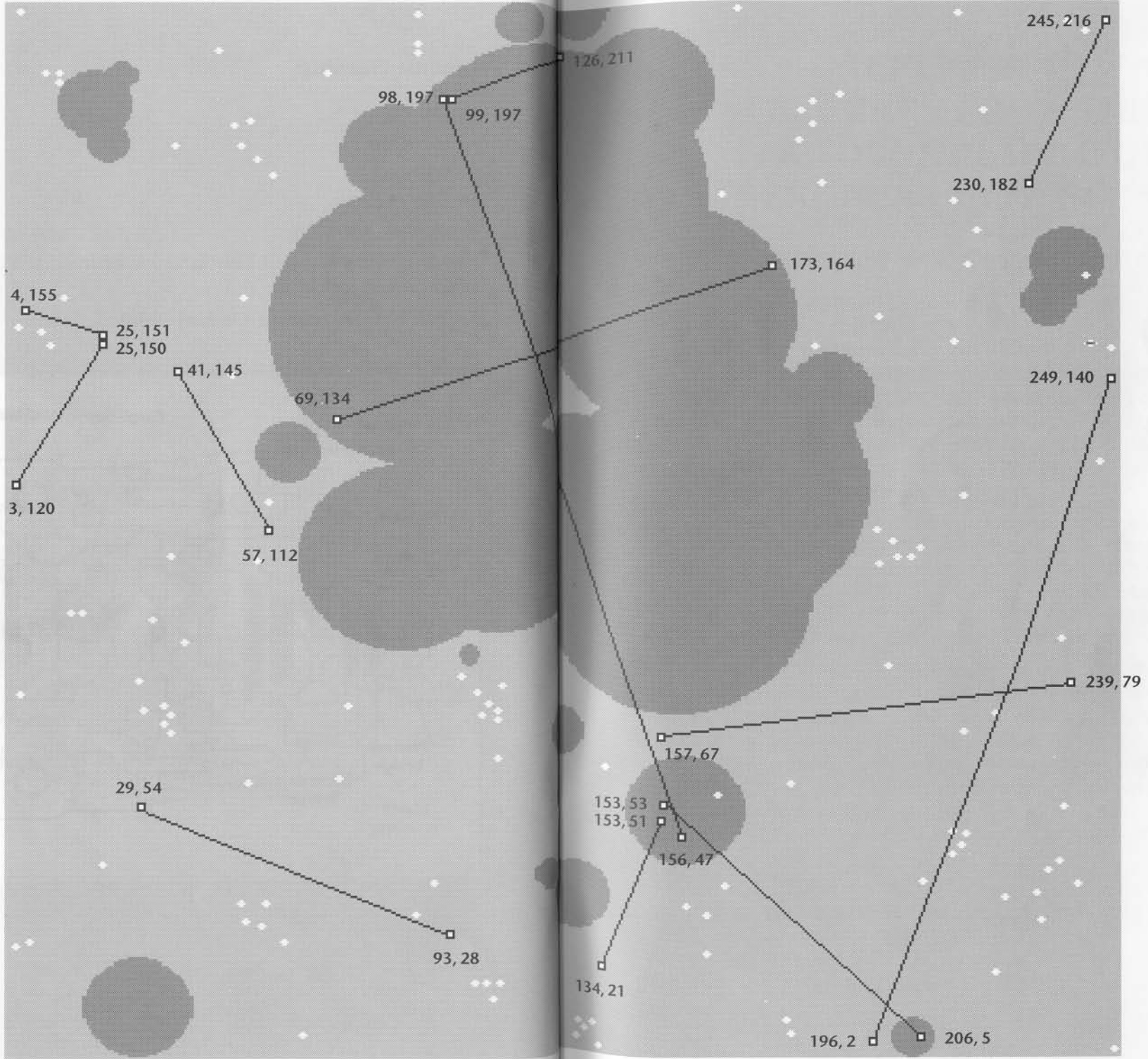
Elements: Tungsten 25.0, Titanium 13.0, Platinum 11.0

Shyneum: 25.0

Special: Microwave Beam, Cloaking Device



Appendix D:
Flux Nodes



Flux Nodes by Coordinates

<u>X, Y</u>	<u>X, Y</u>
3, 120	25, 150
4, 155	25, 151
29, 54	93, 28
41, 145	57, 112
59, 215	61, 189
63, 150	79, 160
69, 134	173, 164
134, 21	153, 51
160, 65	173, 68
157, 67	239, 79
230, 182	245, 216
196, 2	249, 140
153, 53	206, 5
98, 197	156, 47
99, 197	126, 211
33, 70	70, 82
70, 83	68, 16
68, 82	70, 81
69, 83	69, 81
71, 82	100, 107
69, 82	181, 153
181, 155	170, 143
181, 154	215, 171
180, 154	175, 127
180, 153	182, 154
182, 153	105, 74
181, 152	182, 137
182, 152	183, 136
183, 153	183, 137
182, 135	183, 138
181, 136	184, 137
181, 137	176, 127
182, 136	239, 80

APPENDIX E: EXCERPT FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF NERGNERJ BEMFBLUNK

(The famous Spemin Philosopher/Adventurer)

I I have heard it said by many that I, Nergnerj Bemfblunk, am the most highly developed organism in the universe. Of course my humility and discretion do not allow me to comment on this, and were it not for the fact that this assertion (from a completely objective standpoint) happens to be true, I would not even make mention of it. As it is I have little choice but to bow to the inexorable force of truth, to flow with the eternal river of fact, to yield to the inevitable reality of what is, for who, after all, am I? Ah but once again I wax philosophical, and such was not my intention.

This may come as a shock to most, but I was not always such a highly respected blob. In point of fact I can remember how, in my earliest days, when my slime still glistened and my antennae were still held upright in the impetuosity of youth, I was little more than a ruffian. I wanted nothing more than to travel to distant stars, test myself in glorious combat, and roam the heavens in search of glamorous adventure.

Just after my fifteenth bud-day, I oozed away from home and joined the famous Secret Space Fleet. They had apparently just filled all of the Warship Captain positions, so I was signed on as a 3rd class private on a garbage tug. It was not the most highly respected position, but I felt it was glorious nonetheless. We shipped out almost immediately and I was certain that it would only be a matter of hours before I would distinguish myself by demonstrating my vast superiority in mortal combat with strange and disgusting aliens. I had only to sit back and wait for my destiny.

After about four years I was beginning to become impatient. I was, by this time, admittedly quite an expert on garbage, and that is no small thing. In fact, it was from my early studies of this subject that my philosophy began to emerge. But I was, as I say, becoming impatient, and I felt it was time to help my destiny along a little.

During my service on the tug, my capabilities did not go unrecognized, for after only four short years I had been promoted all the way up to 2nd class private. Not one to miss an opportunity, I used my new power and influence to good advantage by devising a subtle and clever scheme wherein I pretended that I was attempting to steal a small scout ship to go exploring in, so that I would get caught and sent to a prison colony. My plan worked. I spent several months on the colony on Beta Theta Cappa Gamma doing hard labor, just as I had planned, of course, and then I was transferred to the prison colony on Delta Gamma Alpha Beta. It was during this transfer that my master plan came to fruition.

Actually, it was not even until this time that I realized that I had a master plan. But that is the way of genius, is it not? There I was all this time being guided by this brilliant plan buried deep within my awesome mind, and I, not even aware of it. It was from this realization that I was able to formulate the Ninth Law of Universal Truth: "The greater the idea, the less we are aware of it such that the most brilliant revelations go entirely unnoticed. Furthermore, he who has a brilliant idea is often the last one to know of it."

But once again I digress. I was saying that it was during my journey to Delta Gamma Alpha Beta that my master plan came to fruition. Our transport ship was attacked and boarded by one of the many pirate ships that roam the space lanes. I knew at first glance that the ship was of queer alien design as it lacked the comforting irregularity, and the many decorative bumps and bulges so familiar on Spemin ships. This ship was long and smooth, devoid of any curlicues or false window shutters. It was frightening and disgusting. In a way, however, I remember being excited. This was my first chance to see aliens.

After a brief interchange, the alien pirate ship docked with our ship and the aliens came aboard. I puffed myself up to appear impressive and fixed all twelve eyes on the portal. An alien walked in and my excitement immediately gave way to terror. There standing in front of me, goddess knows how, on two horrible stalk-like protrusions, was the most horrifying monster I had ever dreamed of.

I immediately flattened out to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. This only compounded my terror, for as soon as I did this the fleshy nodule perched atop the length of this horrifying slimeless creature swiveled to face me. I'm sure I must have secreted almost one half my fluid substance as I saw it fix its two, yes just two, beady eyes buried deep in that dry fleshy nodule, on my person. Then, when I thought I was as

scared as it was possible to be, it did a horrifying thing. The fleshy nodule cracked open. Inside I could see all manner of small disgusting objects, and from out of the crack issued a low terrible rumbling sound that shook me to the core. This was doubtless some form of attack. I came close to passing out, but I am, after all, a Spemin, and I managed somehow to bear up under this gruesome assault. Following this, two tentacles rose up, one from each side of its body, and started waving about as if they had minds of their own. One of these grasped some devilish looking instrument of torture. The monster then raised up one of its stilt legs and began to move towards me. This was too much even for my robust constitution, and I quickly lost consciousness.

When I awoke I had an uneasy feeling for a reason I couldn't immediately place. Then I realized it was because I couldn't hear the familiar coughing and sputtering of the engine I had grown so used to, but only a low pitched eerie humming sound. I opened my eyes and confirmed my suspicion — I was on board the alien monsters' ship.

I seemed to be alone in some sort of torture chamber. The walls were completely flat and at perfect right angles to each other. In addition, the whole room was one single color, a horrible white! The chamber was obviously designed to drive any intelligent creature insane. I felt dizzy and closed all my eyes. My skin was almost completely dry, and my antennae sagged shamefully. What I wouldn't have given then for a nice slime pit to soak in, and a juicy glob of protein substance to engulf.

I knew that my hours were numbered. With death imminent, I was just about to have a philosophical revelation, as I am apt to do in such circumstances, when I heard a noise approaching. I forced my antennae up into a position that conveys indignation and changed my color to convey casual unconcern with a touch of belligerent disdain. I was careful to focus only four of my eyes on the doorway so as not to appear too concerned. Perhaps three might've been more appropriate, but I felt I wasn't being excessive.

The creature entered and it was fully as horrible as I'd remembered it. This particular creature had two lumps on what, I assume, was its front side which made it a touch less frightening, but it also had a large dry mass of tangled threads atop its sensory nodule which offset its lumpiness and gave it an even more frightening aspect than the first creature I'd seen.

In spite of the terror I felt I held firm, but then the creature pulled out a horrible device. I started to feel faint again, when suddenly the creature

held the device up to the crack in its sensory nodule and said in a very distorted, but nonetheless intelligible burble — "Greetings." For a moment I couldn't believe my antennae. Then I realized that the device must be some sort of translating tool. Thinking calmly and quickly I decided to use a subtle psychological ploy.

"Please don't hurt me. Please! I'll do anything! Kill all the others, but please don't hurt me!!"

"We are not going to hurt you," the monster burred back. Seeing that my ploy had worked, and I now had the upper hand, I decided to press my advantage.

"Of course you won't hurt me," I said. "That is because you cannot. We are the almighty and powerful Spemin. You tremble before me, inferior creature!"

I saw the crack in the creature's sensory nodule spread and turn up at the ends revealing rows of a hard white substance, and the creature made a strange repetitive barking sound. This obviously was a submissive behavior meant to indicate fear and obedience. The creature then reached for a device hanging about midlevel on its body, with one of its tentacles. It pointed the device at a large metallic object just to my left. Suddenly a brilliant burst of light shot out of the device and hit the object, burning a hole in it the size of a lower antennae disk. Something told me that it was a weapon. In light of this, I was forced to the conclusion that I might have been slightly mistaken in my interpretation of the alien's barking behavior. I waved my antennae in small circles and expanded my left side while contracting my right side in the universal gesture for peace and friendship.

The gesture was apparently effective for I soon found myself burbling with the creature at length. With my superior intellect I was quickly able to trick it into telling me that they were not, in fact, a pirate ship, but rather they were emissaries from a distant planet called Erph. The creature at first seemed moderately intelligent, but as it turned out it was not very smart at all. I told the creature that I was the highest authority on the Spemin ship and so was the blob to be dealt with. In spite of the band around my antennae which clearly marked me as a prisoner, the stupid creature believed me. As a result, I was treated well by these creatures until we reached Spewta, our homeworld, and have since, after relaying my harrowing adventures to the masses, been heralded as one of the foremost blobs on alien/human psychology.

As I pointed out earlier, such was my plan from the very beginning. To pretend to steal a ship and then get caught, only to be sent to a prison colony, and then be transferred to another planet, and on route be attacked by pirates, which turn out to be alien emissaries of a limited intelligence who I conned into dealing with me, so that I should become, among other things, a renowned expert on alien psychology. Who could have thought of such a plan. Certainly none but I, Nergnerj Bemfblunk, master strategist, adventurer, philosopher, and garbage expert extraordinaire.